

Those- Who- Lived

Chapter One

"Nanna, please stop crying!" Harry begged. He crouched next to his little sister, and gently stroked her hair. "I'll be back for Christmas, I promise! Hogwarts isn't going to be holding me there for anything."

Eleven-year-old Harry Potter was standing on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters with his trunk and owl on a cart behind him and his parents standing nearby. James was smiling ruefully, while Lily plucked seven-year-old Nanna off the ground.

"There now, Nanna, you know he'll be back. And in the meantime, you'll have all the time in the world to spend with me. You'll have to keep me busy, or else I might start missing him too." Lily smiled proudly down at her son, and Harry blushed before glancing around the platform once more. He was waiting impatiently for his friends to arrive, and, after not finding them once more, he gave his mother a smile and turned determinedly to his father.

James Potter was diligently scanning the platform, his Auror uniform on as he was here officially. The ministry was still slightly nervous, despite the ten years since the Death Eaters had just disappeared for no solid reason, and so any Auror seeing their children off to Hogwarts each year was considered 'on duty'. It was a security precaution James supported, and he took it very seriously. However, when his son firmly tugged the hem of his robe, he looked down and smiled brightly.

"Hey squirt, what do you need?"

"My trunk, dad. Can we get it in a compartment now? It doesn't look like Neville's gonna get here yet, so I want to save us a spot."

James smiled and grabbed the cart. "Where do you want to sit?"

"Up at the front."

James grinned and took off at a jog, making Harry yelp and chase after him, easily pulling ahead and swinging himself in. Leaving his dad behind, Harry pulled into the compartment, and then stopped as he found himself facing another boy his age, who looked a lot like himself. Pulling up short, he frowned.

“Who are you?”

The boy was markedly shorter than Harry, and he glared up at him with all the might his small frame could muster. Harry would have been amused had he not looked so very serious about it.

“What? Do you have any manners? Get out of my compartment.”

James glanced up past his son and frowned. “Hey, Harry? Is someone in there?”

Harry scowled at the boy, and then turned and walked back out past his dad. “Yeah, there’s a kid. He’s really rude. Where’s another good spot?”

James frowned back at the compartment again, and then smiled at Harry. “The one ahead might be clear.”

It was, and James helped Harry pack his stuff up. Once it was all in there, James led Harry back. Halfway there, Harry saw Alice and Frank coming in, and tugged on James hand before taking off running once more. James looked over to see Frank and Alice both in their Auror uniforms, and he quickly moved towards them, as he saw Lily doing as well. They arrived after their son, and found the two of them already making banter. Nanna eagerly demanded to be put down – she wanted to play with Alice’s eight-year-old daughter Melanie. James smiled fondly at Harry and Neville, and then led Frank to the compartment Harry had found to add Neville’s stuff to Harry’s. Neville and Harry themselves were left with Lily and Alice.

“Neville! I got us a compartment, and it’s right at the front! And some of the other kids just coming in are rude.”

Neville laughed, and playfully pushed Harry back. "You always manage to find rude people, Harry."

"Do not."

"Yes, you do. Where's Ron?"

Harry stood up straight and stared around the Platform. He didn't see a mass of red hair, and frowned. "Not here yet. You looking forward to anyone else?"

Neville made a face. "Draco's going to be here."

Harry scowled. "Not cool. He'll be a shoo-in for Slytherin."

"You're still stuck on Gryffindor?" Neville asked.

"What?" Harry asked. "Of course! I'm not going anywhere else!"

"Okay, okay!" Neville laughed. "Harry Potter, Gryffindor through and through!"

"You better believe it! Hey, it's the Weasleys!" Harry shouted, grabbing his mother's hand and pointing to the red haired family just moving through the barrier. Lily laughed, and she and Alice both waved. Molly glanced up and smiled brightly; Arthur began to move through the crowd towards them, trailed by Percy. Neville made a face; Harry laughed.

Ron quickly pushed forward to run towards his two best friends. He tackled Harry immediately, but, having expected this, Harry managed to keep his feet. Neville took on an announcer's voice.

"All hail Ronald, the tackling champion of 1991!"

Ron made a face, and stood straight. He was easily the tallest of the three, and Harry really thought that unfair. He'd ended up with his mother's small frame and was barely taller than Neville. Neville, however, was stockier than him, Harry being a slight child, much like the boy he'd run into ...

"Hey Ron, I ran into this little stick kid earlier. He'd taken the compartment I wanted."

Ron laughed. "Was he smaller than you?"

Harry made a face. "Yes, he was. And he was really rude. Hey, let's go put your stuff away."

Ron nodded and followed as Harry led the way to the compartment he'd claimed, leaving Lily, Molly and Alice locked in conversation and keeping a careful eye on the youngest of their children. Ginny was standing near her mother, looking downtrodden, while Nanna and Melanie were both talking animatedly between each other. Neville's little brother, six-year-old Connor, had been left at home with a sitter, likely Emmeline Vance, whose daughter was Connor's age. All their parents knew each other from an old social group of something, but Harry, Ron, and Neville didn't really care. It was all dealt with now. Why should they worry?

Ronald was packed into their compartment as well, and they all heaved a sigh of relief and went back out for the time until the train had to leave. James ushered them on well before the warning whistle, though, and the families stood outside waiting and watching. Harry stifled the feeling of anxiety in his chest and sighed, slouching in his seat. Neville smiled wanly as well, but Ron seemed too happy to notice. Harry supposed that with such a hectic home, going away to Hogwarts was probably fun. Harry, however, knew he was going to end up missing Nanna something bad. Even if she was annoying ...

Around half-past twelve, the witch with the sweets cart came by. Ron smiled, and pushed aside the sandwiches he'd brought as both Neville and Harry bought themselves a fair share of the candy there, and then spread it between them all. Harry grew a little bored of his candy and asked Ron for one of the sandwiches. Ron stared at him a moment.

"You want to eat a sandwich?"

Harry flushed slightly and then determinedly nodded. "I like sandwiches." He stated, and snagged one off the seat. It turned out to be corned beef, and a little dry, but some pumpkin juice fixed that very easily. Neville snickered.

"Harry'll eat about anything. He's only ever picky about his candy."

Indeed, Harry had only bought liquorice wands, chocolate frogs, Bertie Bott's Every Flavoured Beans, and some Fizzing Whizzbees. He'd left everything else alone. Annoyed at Neville, Harry threw a chocolate frog at him, and snagged another serving of pumpkin juice as he finished off the sandwich.

"And you eat anything you can get your hands on, just like Ron." Harry returned. "You both are so weird."

"Look who's talking, Potter."

All three boys looked out of the compartment and glared at the pale boy standing in the door. Draco Malfoy had apparently decided to make an appearance today, and all three of them stood carefully and glared. Draco sneered.

"I thought you three would all be here together. What are you up to, talking Gryffindor?"

"Please Draco," Harry snapped. "You can do better than that. Everyone knows you're as much of a shoo-in to Slytherin as we all are to Gryffindor. It's really stupid to repeat the same thing."

"Does your dad still do his stupid work today? Keeping an eye on the little kids when everyone knows the ministry's just crazy!"

Neville looked ready to step forward and slug Draco across the jaw, but Harry put his hand on Neville's shoulder and stepped forward. He was visibly angry, but his hands remained by his sides, even as they curled into fists. "And your dad is just wondering what hole to look in to find his own excuse to go back to his old ways, isn't he?" Harry had overheard his father several times when they'd thought him in bed. He'd heard speculation repeated several times that Voldemort was

biding his time, and Harry believed it. He also believed his father that Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater. Draco apparently agreed, as he flushed a dull pink and went for his pocket, presumably his wand. Harry stepped back, his own hand moving to slide over his own Holly and Phoenix feather, the same wand that had made his mother and father pale when they'd heard Ollivander say it was the twin to Voldemort's. Harry hadn't really cared; he'd just been relieved he'd found one after the search had taken so long. It was only a tool, albeit a very special one.

They didn't get much farther than reaching for their individual wands when they both froze as an older student hollered at them down the corridor.

"There is no fighting on the train! Malfoy, get back in your own space and stop bugging Potter! Potter, stop egging him on."

Harry scrunched up his face, but removed his hand from his pocket to shove the door closed in Draco's face. Draco quickly stepped out of the way, stomped his foot, and moved away several steps. However, Harry quickly shot back out when he heard Draco start in on someone else.

"Stop staring, mudblood."

Harry slammed the door open, ready to rip into Draco's scrawny little hide, when he heard whoever was addressed snipe right back,

"At least I'm not some fake blonde inbred bimbo, Malfoy. Go stick your head in someone else's hole!"

Harry was out in the hall in time to see the black-haired boy he'd seen earlier slam his own door in Draco's face once more. Harry stopped where he was, and didn't react when Malfoy told him to mind his own business, the red colour in his cheeks darkening even more. Ron and Neville finally pulled him back in and shut the door as Harry just blinked blankly.

"What is it, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing, I just ... don't get it. Or maybe I do. The kid who called Malfoy a fake blonde was that rude kid I'd seen earlier."

Neville laughed. "Rude he is, but he's good at insulting Malfoy. I wonder where he'll end up."

Ron snorted, but Harry frowned. "So long as he's not in Gryffindor with me, I don't think I really care."

Neville shook his head. "I doubt it. I think I pity Malfoy, though; he'll probably end up stuck with him in Slytherin!"

Harry snorted, and then leaned back and smiled. He supposed things would work out all right after all.

They were quiet for a little while until Harry pulled out his Exploding Snap deck. They played, and then Ron got them all excited. "Harry, guess what?"

Harry blinked, and played his turn, before turning back. "No, I don't want to know." He intoned. Ron laughed, played, and shook his head.

"It's from Bill, actually, and was all over the papers. Gringotts was broken into."

Harry slipped up, and pulled quickly out of the way as the hand exploded. After a moment, he stared back at Ron. "What? Who? How? What was taken?"

"Nothing!" Ron exclaimed. "And nothing happened to them either! That's why it's such big news. But Harry, it happened on your birthday!"

Harry shook his head determinedly. "This is getting too weird. Hey, we were in Diagon Alley then, and we saw Hagrid go into the bank. Dad said he was on business from Dumbledore most like ..."

Neville and Ron's eyes both glinted in the compartment, and they each grinned. Business from Dumbledore was important indeed, and

likely whatever had happened was related. It was a bit of an unspoken agreement. Neville scratched his head.

“My mum was real worried about the papers that day, actually, and although I never looked it was something really big, I’m sure. Dad reassured her Dumbledore had taken care of it ...”

Percy Weasley poked his head in and scowled at them, interrupting their discussion of that conspiracy theory. “We’re almost there, you know. You should get ready, Ronald, and your little friends.” Percy gave Neville and Harry a firm nod and a stern look before pulling back out of the compartment without another word. Ron started mumbling curses against him, but Harry and Neville just laughed it off, and pulled on their robes, stuffing their pockets with the last of the candy, Harry hoarding his favourites as Ron and Neville laughed. Harry merely stuck out his tongue, and stalked into the corridor to join the rest of the throng. Directly behind him, however, was the dark little boy and beside him was a bushy-haired witch with a very excited expression, and large front teeth. He seemed to be listening to her with slightly disdainful amusement, but she didn’t seem to notice, instead continuing on a long spiel that Harry finally decided was indicative that she was quite muggle-born. They were apparently discussing the houses and their prospects.

“-I heard that Ravenclaw is for those in the school who are really into learning, but I personally want to end up in Gryffindor. I heard Albus Dumbledore was in that house myself, actually, and he also taught Transfiguration before he was Headmaster.”

“I’d heard that.” The boy allowed. “However, I think I’m going to end up in Slytherin.” The girl gave a short gasp, and the boy snorted. “Don’t believe everything you read. Besides, just because you’re in a house doesn’t change who you are. I think I’d like to keep talking to you no matter where we end up.” His tone sounded politely interested. Harry thought he sounded fake, but the girl beamed.

Harry shook his head and rolled his eyes to Ron and Neville, who started laughing quietly. A huff behind them made them look, and he found the girl looking down on him. This was infuriating, as she was indeed, barely taller than him, about as much taller as the other boy

was shorter. Ignoring his wish for more height, Harry smiled gently at the girl and politely offered his hand. "Harry Potter. Am I correct to guess that you're muggleborn? My mother is."

The girl smiled carefully at him and accepted his handshake. "Yes, I'm muggleborn. I'm Hermione Granger, and this boy is ..." She stopped as he gently pushed her and shook his head, giving Harry a slightly dirty look. Hermione looked trapped, but then she just squared her shoulders and shrugged. "I suppose he'll tell you himself if he wants. It's good to meet you. Are your parents the Potters, your father James Potter the decorated Auror?"

Harry smiled proudly and nodded. His father had received an Order of Merlin, first-class, when peace had been tentatively declared. His mother and godfather, Sirius Black, had received the same award, only his mother's was second-class. Hermione looked ready to start on a long rant about how much she knew, and so Harry made a point of introducing Neville and Ron as well. Hermione knew of Frank and Alice as well, and their Order of Merlin, second-class, awards, and she looked apologetic that she didn't know as much about Ron. However, they were shortly bumped outside as the train stopped, and Harry lost her and the boy as they made their way over to the ever-cheerful Hagrid.

The trip to Hogwarts was expected, and Harry only ran into the boy once. A tall black boy joined Harry, Ron, and Neville in their boat and introduced himself as Dean Thomas. They then stood near the front of the room Professor McGonagall lead them too, and followed her into the Great Hall at the front of the line. Harry was rather determinedly not thinking about what the sorting might include, as Sirius had several times hinted that it was hard, and his mother had made an off-hand comment about it being nerve-wracking. Neither was exactly comforting. Thus, Harry was a nervous as the rest of them when McGonagall set the hat on a stool in front of them. When it moved to sing, he jumped.

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.
There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.
You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind
Where those of wit and learning
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a thinking cap!"

Harry was silently stunned as the rest of the school started clapping, before he joined in weakly. McGonagall cleared her throat and began.

"When I call your name, you will sit on the stool and put on the hat to be sorted. Abbot, Hannah."

Harry heaved a short sigh of relief, and listened to the sorting with only half an ear. He noted Hermione Granger went into Gryffindor, as did Neville. Malfoy barely spent a moment under the hat before he became a Slytherin. However, Harry felt mildly ill as his name was called, to the same awed looks Neville had gotten. He ignored them;

he had always been looked at in the light of his parents. It was mildly annoying, but unavoidable.

The hat slid onto his head with ease, and fell down over his eyes. Harry stifled his irritation, but jumped when a voice began whispering into his ear.

“My oh my, the second special boy. You and Longbottom are much alike, but you’re less happy with what you have. You want to be known for who you are, and not your parents. There’s a place for boys like you, now –“

‘No! I’m not going into Slytherin!’ Harry furiously thought at the hat.
‘I’m no Slytherin!’

Harry could tell the hat was put out. “That’s not really fair, you know. You children need to go where you belong. However, I don’t suppose you’d do best in a house you hated. I’m very disappointed, though. The houses should not be so divided, and you would do well in bridging that gap ...”

Desperate, Harry asked, ‘Anything! I’ll do anything to not be put there!’

“Anything? Well then, I know the list of students better than Minnie, and I know something you don’t about the next boy ... if you promise to make friends with him at some point, I think I can honour your choice ...”

‘Sure, I’ll make friends with him if he wants.’ Harry agreed. He knew that would likely make it easy to avoid it, as he couldn’t be resorted afterwards and the kid probably wouldn’t want to make friends anyways.

The hat sighed gustily, and resigned, he continued. “Mind you, Potter, always remember, your house should have been Slytherin, but for you, I’ll place you in Gryffindor!”

The word echoed in the hall, and the Great Hall roared with cheers. Harry shakily pulled off the hat and hurried to take his place next to

Neville and the Weasley twins, before, curious, looking back at McGonagall to see who the next boy was.

“Prince, Alan.”

Harry felt his stomach drop as the rude, dark-haired small boy stepped forward and put on the hat. It covered his entire face, and remained there for only a minute or two before it straightened, and announced with conviction that Harry felt was mocking him, “Slytherin!”

The boy stood and set the hat back down and his eyes scanned the room. He found Harry and locked eyes with him, and Harry felt his stomach drop again. Alan Prince did not like him. And Harry couldn’t help but feel that he returned the sentiment, with interest.

Here is the first chapter of Those- Who- Lived. I will post all chapters until first year is done, as they are all finished, and will post each after either a set time of about a month, or after I get five reviews for this. Once second year is done, I'll begin posting that, and so on and so forth for each year.

So if you want to see an update, please review!

A/N: July 2008: Just as a potential note, first and second year are prime for a rewrite once I get done. So please keep reading! The time between now and then has improved my writing greatly, so fourth year and up are much better.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Two

The one thing that Harry was certain was the crowning complement of his first week was that he had Potions with the Slytherins. He'd just barely gotten the path from the dorms to the Great Hall figured out, and now he was stuck into the dungeons. Worse yet, Ron held them up as he stuffed a last few crisps into his mouth, and they ended up showing up late. Snape glared them down, and then carefully made a point of looking down his list. Harry bristled. Snape knew very well whom they all were and from the looks of things he hadn't yet taken roll. He couldn't be unfair to them on their first day! They'd nearly gotten lost coming down there.

"Ah, glad to see the children of our fighters are as diligent in their arrival as their parents. Weasley, please take the seat two in front of you, and Longbottom and Potter ..." He paused, as Ron settled with a grimace next to Granger. She'd been absolutely obsessive about her homework this week, and Harry was fairly certain her time under the hat had been spent talking her way out of Ravenclaw. However, there were only so many seats left, and an odd number of students. That left only two options, the dark desk in the very back, or the bench next to Alan Prince.

"Potter, Longbottom, you will be working with Prince." Snape announced.

Harry stifled a groan and sat down, glaring up at Snape. He then did a double-take; Snape looked regretful! Feeling Prince moving beside him, Harry spared him a glance and saw him shrug, looking back at the teacher. Feeling both put-off and cheated that Snape apparently sympathized with the student, Harry quickly got out his own things and scattered them in front of him as Neville did the same. Next to him, he heard Prince hiss and growl under his breath before he leaned over and hissed at them.

"Would you put those things in order? I'm not going to lose a grade because I'm stuck with two unneeded, inept fools!"

Harry glared at him, and purposefully scattered his things once more as he added a small knife set. Prince growled in the back of his throat, but they were cut off.

"Unnecessary conversation will not occur in my classroom." Harry glanced up and met a stare that told him that were Prince not involved, he'd have lost points. Harry just glared back, and Snape sneered. "Five points for disrespecting a teacher, Potter. Do not make any unneeded expressions towards me again." He then turned to his papers and called roll once more, about the only time Harry thought he'd address the houses on equal grounds ever.

Snape finished the roll and looked over the class with a fierce stare as he locked his hands behind him and began to pace the front of the class. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of a softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses ... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death ... if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Granger was bouncing in her seat in front of them, making Ron edge away, while Harry was wondering why he felt the need to be so melodramatic. Neville elbowed him, and Harry scowled over at him before following his finger to look at Prince. Prince's expression was rather priceless: He was watching Snape as though he'd never seen his like before, when previously he'd been so knowledgeable. Harry snickered into his hand, and jumped as Snape addressed him.

"Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of Asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry paused and sat back. He knew he knew that but it just wasn't coming. Next to him, Prince was giving him a strange look. Harry just shook his head carefully, and Prince looked disgusted.

Snape merely sneered. "Prince?"

"A basic neutral conducive to the Draught of Living Death, sir." Prince recited.

Harry made a face. What the hell was a 'basic neutral'? Snape looked at him, mildly curious, and Prince coloured.

"I knew a meticulous Potions Master who was fond of experimenting, sir."

Snape just nodded. Harry still felt confused, but Snape then returned his attention to him, and Harry grimaced.

"Longbottom," Harry blinked, and then glanced to Neville like the rest of the class, "Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Neville blinked twice, then smiled. "The stomach of a goat, sir."

Prince, next to Harry, rolled his eyes.

Snape looked like he was sucking a lemon. "Well then. Potter, can you tell me the difference between Wolfsbane and Monkshood?"

Harry glared. "It's nothing, sir. They're the same plant."

Snape once more made a face, but he turned back to the board and waved his wand, as writing appeared. "It is also called Aconite. Well? Everyone should be writing. As for a bezoar, it is a stone that will protect you from most poisons."

Snape continued his lecture, and then told them they would be working in pairs to make their potion. He made sure, however, that Harry and Neville knew they were working with Prince. Again, Harry saw him cast an infuriatingly apologetic look at Prince, and when Harry came back with the ingredients with Neville he placed them unnecessarily hard. Prince levelled a scalding glare at him as he organized their ingredients, shuffling them around to no point Harry could see.

"Potter, please crush the snake fangs – make sure it's fine – And Longbottom, hand me the nettles you put out of reach." Prince

ordered, concentrating on adding a spoonful of salt to their boiling water as he calmly stirred the potion without seeming to really pay attention.

Harry glared down, and noticed that the snake fangs he was supposed to be crushing were right in front of him. A quick reference to the board showed that Prince had organized the ingredients as they would come up in the potion. Harry glared as Prince took the nettles from Neville and began to add them smoothly.

"You're not working, Potter." Prince said.

Harry jumped and glared, but he nearly upset the mortar when Snape spoke from behind him.

"I don't believe it's fair to make Prince do all the work, Potter. Please make sure you do your share or else it will be points from Gryffindor."

Harry glared at him as he swept past, but he quickly set about crushing the fangs. Prince checked over his shoulder once more, and then shook his head.

"They need to be finer."

Harry turned and snapped at him, "Do it yourself, then!"

Prince turned up to him, and then raised his eyebrow.

Harry snarled and began grinding again with a vengeance. It wasn't fair! But then again, he knew it was fair. A glance over again, proved that Prince was waiting patiently for him to finish; the potion was stable and waiting. No matter how frustrating it was.

The fangs went into the potion, and Prince once again delegated to them to prepare the ingredients. He was clearly unhappy with several of the preparations, but he did the work anyways. However, Harry objected when he was asked to stew the horned slugs. Prince was pouring in the porcupine quills, and he rolled his eyes.

"Will you just stop whining, Potter? I didn't ask to be your partner!"

"I didn't ask to get stuck with you either, Prince. Stop ordering me around, and why don't you just do it all yourself?"

"I'm supposed to be working with you—"

"Well I don't want to work with a spoiled rotten brat!" Harry shouted. The class was staring at them, but Prince was furious. Angrily, he reached over and tossed a handful of something into the cauldron, which subsequently sent a huge plume of stinging orange smoke to the ceiling. Snape snarled into the mess.

"Damn you, child! Everyone, leave the classroom now, but walk carefully. You aren't in immediate danger; don't race! I will not have you trampling each other like fools."

Harry grabbed Neville's hand, but he couldn't seem to find his balance and they both stumbled into the other students as they walked out. Once outside, Harry slumped against the wall and Ron immediately came over to check on him.

"You all right, Harry? That looked nasty; I can't believe he did that."

"I have no clue what was going through his head!" Harry returned. "He did that on purpose! I don't know what he did, but hell. That wasn't cool."

All of the students jumped as Snape came out, helping along a coughing Prince who clung to him, hunched over and rubbing his eyes. He levelled a stony glare at Harry and Neville and then addressed the class. "Classes are cancelled today, thanks to a stupid mistake. We will repeat this assignment at a later date. Prince, Potter and Longbottom, you three will go to the Hospital wing now. Weasley, go with them. I'm not sure that smoke was exactly healthy, and you will be checked out. I'm sure Prince can tell Pomfrey what happened." Snape's glare was unforgiving at the boy he was helping stand, and Prince looked down at his feet, still rubbing his eyes. "Your things will be brought up to you later. Get moving. Everyone else, wait here while I air out the classroom. If any of you start anything, you will be facing serious consequences."

Harry glared at Prince as he staggered over, and he coughed without looking at him, still worrying his eyes. Ron waved them on up the corridor, and Harry pulled Neville with him as they diligently followed. They didn't get far when Ron looked back, and stopped.

"Hey, Prince!" He called.

Harry looked in time to see Prince trip and fall against the wall, hacking into his hand without looking. Harry thought back and scowled. Prince had been directly over the cauldron: he would have gotten a face full of whatever that smoke had been.

'You would do well in bridging that gap'

Harry scowled as he remembered his sorting, and shook his head before he stalked back over to Prince and grabbed his arm. Prince twitched away, changing from looking pained to being annoyed in moments.

"You can't even walk straight, Prince. Just let me help you get to Madam Pomfrey already." Harry insisted.

"I don't need help, Potter." He growled. His tone was rendered rather ineffectual as he collapsed coughing once more. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Neville, Ron, come help me. He can't walk."

"I said I don't need help!" Prince snarled once more. He pulled his arm free and then staggered into the wall. Ron came up beside him, and grabbed his left arm as Harry once more seized his right.

"Well tough." Ron said. "You're getting it anyways. We don't need to take even longer getting up there so come along. It's your own damn fault."

Prince looked ready to snarl at them once more, but he dissolved into hacking once more, grimaced, and submitted.

It was a relatively long trip to the hospital wing, as Harry and Neville started coughing as well. Prince's eyes had begun to stream, and his pale face was rapidly turning red as they came in, and Madam Pomfrey immediately set about scolding them.

"Good grief, children, what took you so long? Absolutely foolish of him to send you up here like that, you shouldn't have exerted yourselves. Sit down; sit down, all of you. Who's worst off?"

"Prince." Ron coughed.

"Oh dear," Pomfrey tutted as she looked him over, scowling at his red face and the rapid wheezing quality of his breath. "What happened?"

"Snape said Prince knew." Harry offered. "He did it, after all, and on purpose too." The spite wasn't missing from Harry's tone. Pomfrey scowled at him, but Prince offered his answer.

"Tossed lettuce teeth in early," Prince coughed again, and stretched slightly, as though to ease his breath. "We'd just added porcupine quills to our boil cure. There would have been a contamination of hen's teeth in our stuff as well; else the smoke wouldn't have been caustic. Probably got added with the snake fangs when someone put them back wrong." Prince coughed again and Madam Pomfrey tutted once more.

"Nasty, that. Let me get something for your throats, poor thing. All of the students should get one, really, but it should go away by itself within a few hours. You, however ..."

Pomfrey bustled off and fetched the phials as Neville and Harry settled themselves on a bed just off to the side, Ron sitting next to them. Prince ignored them completely, and Pomfrey returned, handing everyone a phial, with a second for Prince

"This actually shouldn't taste bad, really, so drink up and it'll keep you until the irritation wears off on its own. Drink up!"

Harry downed his and grimaced, but he handed it back easily. It wasn't really bad; it just wasn't good. Prince got a wash for his face,

and he thanked Pomfrey shortly before heading out the door once cured. Harry, Neville and Ron followed. Harry watched him go, irritated.

"He didn't even say thank you." Harry grumbled. "Git."

||||

The next week was much better, in Harry's opinion. Neville may have nearly killed himself on his broom but Harry was now on the Quidditch team early. Prince hadn't seemed to care about it happening, though; Harry remembered he seemed completely disinterested in the flying up until Harry had caught a glimpse of him afterwards: he'd been looking at him with absolutely calculating eyes. He'd then turned to address Malfoy, calling him what Ron later reported being a 'petty, worthless disgrace to Slytherin lacking any cunning, originality or prestige. The only reason your thick head gets off the ground is because it's filled with nothing but hot air.'

Harry had to admit, he was pretty impressed with Prince's ideas for insults. He just wouldn't ever tell him that. Then again, Harry wasn't sure he wanted Prince interfering as he was, because Harry clearly saw him stop Malfoy from leaving the Slytherin table, and forced him back into his seat. Prince then looked straight across the hall and stuck his tongue out at Harry when he saw he was watching.

Acting every year of his age, Harry returned the gesture.

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Quidditch practice was the highlight of the next few months for Harry, save for Ron nearly getting himself expelled for being caught out late. He'd been lost, though, so whatever the misbehaviour, McGonagall pardoned it. He did, however, have the most fascinating story, involving the locked door on the third floor and a rather loud snarling behind it. It was certainly the most curious thing possible to have in a castle, but then again, this was Hogwarts. Such things weren't exactly unprecedented.

Of course, when the troll got in on Halloween, Harry felt that such things shouldn't be part and parcel of a magical castle. Especially when he really needed to not feel so guilty about one Ms. Granger that he ended up risking his life for her.

That morning, Harry had been in his Charms class, playing around rather boredly with his wand. Sirius, his godfather, had taught him just about anything he needed to know about the spell they were practicing when he was six, much against his mother's wishes. Thus, listening to his classmates not figure it out was a tad bit frustrating.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Ron incanted, to absolutely no effect.

Hermione hissed next to him, "It's win-gar-dium levi-o-sa, make the gar nice and long."

Ron turned on her, "If you're so great at this, you do it!"

Hermione fluffed up and glared at him before she turned to her own feather, "Wingardium leviosa" Her feather floated easily off the desk to hover near the ceiling.

Harry, feeling mischievous as he was prone to considering who his parents were, aimed his wand discretely at her and murmured the spell they were practicing. Entirely without warning, Hermione's pointed hat floated off her head and went to hover right by her feather. Grinning, Harry hopped the hat overtop of the floating feather and cancelled the spell, sending both to the table in front of Hermione. Flitwick saw who had been using the spell and tutted over at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, while I am impressed with your handle on the spell, please do not use it to cause disruption in class and interfere with other students. I won't take points today, but no more of that from you."

Harry hung his head in what looked like proper shame, but he was smiling underneath it, as were Neville and Ron. Hermione glared at them all, and formally returned her hat to her head, sending a withering glare Harry's direction. While Harry tried to look innocent, it

didn't really work out too well with the smile that kept tugging its way onto his mouth.

On the way out, Ron immediately began to gripe about Hermione and the way she acted.

"Honestly, she's a nightmare! It's no wonder she doesn't have any friends!"

"Well, I dunno ..." Harry offered. "Maybe if they were deaf so they wouldn't hear her –" He stumbled as someone ran into him, and Harry snarled. "Watch it!"

The student spun, and Harry froze as he saw Hermione looking at him with tears on her face. She included in the spin a vicious slap, and Harry stumbled backwards and clapped a hand to his cheek. He looked up to see her racing off, and Ron was watching him with a slightly pale expression. Neville came up behind him, and drawled,

"I think she heard you."

Harry frowned uneasily, and silently brushed past his friends to keep walking, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach that told him he really shouldn't have said that.

Hermione didn't show up at all in the next classes, and Harry had forgotten her well enough, up until the Halloween feast and the troll. Then, on the way up through the school, he froze in place and grabbed Neville, Ron stopping with them as he hissed in their faces.

"Hermione! She doesn't know! I'm not going to leave her like that!"

Neville paled and followed Harry immediately as Ron vacillated for a moment. Seeing that the rest of the kids had passed along without them, he raced after Harry and Neville to find their way down the corridor towards the girl's bathroom. Harry ran with the others, but he overheard footsteps behind them. Waving his hand, Neville and Ron ducked into the corridor nearby, and Harry hid behind a statue. Snape went past, and Harry watched him go suspiciously. This was definitely not the way to the dungeons. As Neville and Ron came out,

Harry looked over at them and chewed his lip. Neville, anticipating Harry's action, shook his head.

"I'll go; you go with Ron and find Hermione, alright?"

"Thanks Neville. C'mon, Ron." Harry led the way towards the bathroom once more, and between Harry's nervous energy and Ron's long legs, they arrived and found the bathroom. Harry was the one who ran inside.

"Hermione!" Harry called. "There's a troll in the castle, we have to get back to the dorms!"

A shocked gasp came from the far stall, and Hermione poked her head out, wiping away her tears. "What do you mean, a troll?"

"A troll!" Harry repeated. "C'mon, don't tell me you don't know what a troll is!"

"I know what one is!" She hissed. Harry backed off nervously; she looked scary when she did that. "I'm wondering how it got in here!"

"Can we stop wondering and start leaving?" Ron called, his voice shaking. "Because I don't think the troll's still in the dungeons!"

Harry stopped and listened, and he heard a strange grunting. Thinking back to the door, Harry ran out and grabbed Ron before shoving him inside and pulling the door shut on them.

"Now quiet! It'll pass by if there's nothing to interest it here, promise. Probably won't be able to figure out the door anyways." Hermione nodded faintly, looking ill, as Ron paled far enough to make his freckles look painted on. Harry turned back from them, and then faced the door with conviction. However, that paled slightly as he heard heavy breathing pause outside the door. "Er, Hermione?" He breathed. The bushy-haired girl looked up at him, and he gave a weak smile back. "Do you know any spells to lock doors?" When she shook her head, Harry faintly mouthed 'oh' just before he turned and threw her to the ground beneath the sinks.

Not seconds later, the door exploded, forced inward by an angry troll. Harry rolled to his feet and stared palely at the huge, pebbly grey-skinned monstrosity and felt that he knew why kids weren't heroes; they didn't know anything about how to fix a problem this bad. Hermione screamed, and so did Ron, and Harry frantically tried to remember anything that might help. The great lumpy brute stared stupidly around the room as it slouched inside, fixing beady eyes first on Ron, then Hermione and finally, himself. Harry swallowed painfully as it turned to face him.

'Oh, right. Of course it would pick me, the unprotected. This can't be happening! Please?'

Finding no respite as the horny feet shuffled closer, Harry clambered to his feet and edged past the stalls towards the door, the troll following his every move and shifting closer once more. Harry waved frantically to Ron, and then his back was out of the door and moving closer to the hall, the troll following right behind him. He felt a vague sense of elation as it slouched back out of the room, and then Harry felt a sinking feeling as it glanced between him and the nonexistent door once again. Needing something else to keep the trolls attention on him, Harry yelled, wordlessly. The troll glanced back, and faster than Harry had thought a troll should be able to move, it swung its club at him. Harry barely ducked beneath it, and then he heard Ron yell from behind,

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The troll's club leapt from its hands and hovered blankly next to the creature, floating slowly towards the ceiling. Harry scrambled to his feet and then pointed his own wand at the beast. He didn't know quite what he was doing, but as he concentrated, the troll suddenly yelped loudly, grabbing its leg and toppling to its side with a loud thump. Harry scrambled back to his feet, wondering what had happened, and then he looked straight to Ron and Hermione and stopped.

"Ron, Hermione, let's go!"

Ron didn't ask questions; he stopped his spell and began to follow Harry. Harry saw the issue before Ron did, but Hermione incanted

“Wingardium Leviosa” before he could, catching the club when it would have dropped plum on Ron’s head. Harry ran over to him and dragged him out from under it, giving his now blushing and shaking friend a fierce glare.

“Hermione, can you drop that on the troll?” Harry asked. Hermione blinked, and floated the club over and higher, before cancelling the spell and dropping the club to the effect of a rather hollow thud. Harry smiled at her faintly, and then flinched as he heard several footsteps coming from further off. Harry turned to face the swarm of teachers and swallowed his nervousness as he faced them, wishing he could just hide. As Hermione and Ron came to stand next to him, however, Harry felt several times better. He’d actually had a reason for getting in trouble, unlike his dad. He would get through this.

Fifteen points later, and a rather blistering lecture, though, Harry found himself in the tower feeling more than a little deflated. McGonagall had not been impressed to hear that he had first sent Hermione off crying and then had decided to go fetch her without telling anyone older and leaving that to them. The only bright spot he could see was that Neville was waiting, bouncing in place, when they arrived in the tower. Percy immediately drew McGonagall aside, but Harry started for Neville immediately. He paused, remembering Hermione, and turned to pull her along. They found themselves seats, Ron quickly snagged a plate of food, and then waited with bated breath for Neville’s tale. Neville gave it as he bounced in his seat.

“Hey, I see everything worked out for you, Harry.” Harry nodded, and kept his gaze fixed firmly on Neville. Neville flushed and continued. “Snape went up to the third floor corridor. Up there, Quirrel was trying to get past that snarling. You know what that was? A giant three-headed dog. Quirrel and Snape both got run off, but Snape was cursing Hagrid as he went.”

Harry blinked once and then, frowned. “Hagrid … he’s obsessed with dangerous creatures.”

Ron snorted. “He’s barmy.”

"But he's also prone to talking." Harry returned. "Can't keep a secret worth beans. We could get something out of him if we asked, you know."

Ron froze, and Hermione stared at Harry with her mouth slightly open. Neville had a wry smile on his face. Hermione stuttered out,

"That's ... so Slytherin, though."

Harry flinched, and glanced away. "It works, doesn't it?"

Neville shook his head. "Harry, face it, I'll bet the whole time you were under that hat you were arguing your way out of there." At Harry's dull flush, Neville laughed and patted him on the back. "I suppose we should just consider it best for Malfoy and Snape's health that you got your way in here."

"I'm not going to change, just because I'm in a different house." Harry muttered.

Neville just grinned wider. "Course not. This means we'll get out of even more trouble with your help and we're less likely to be caught. I like having classes with you."

Harry just shrugged into the camaraderie and then, glancing at Ron's plate, stood to get his own.

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The first Quidditch match left Harry ecstatic; they'd won by an amazing margin, and although Harry never wanted to perform that catch again, as having the snitch trying to fly in one's mouth was rather unpleasant, it still was most shocking! Everyone seemed enthralled by it. However, on the way back into the castle, Harry heard from Neville later on that Neville had detoured out of the procession of happy Gryffindors when he'd overheard a loud shouting match down one of the hall ways. He'd recanted it for them in the common room when he'd come back up.

Snape had been lecturing Quirrel, and beside them, on the floor, unconscious, had been Prince. Neville had never seen Snape so livid: Quirrel had been pressed against the wall, white-faced and trembling worse than ever. He couldn't even seem to form a coherent sentence. From what Neville overheard, though, it was with good reason he couldn't. He remembered one line distinctly.

"If I ever catch that type of hocus pocus around the boy again, you will never be found unless Filch gets it in his head to clean out the lower levels of the dungeons. Do you hear me? You will not touch the boy again."

Harry supposed it was only natural for Snape to defend his Slytherins, but something about the attitude he'd had for Prince made him wonder if there wasn't a bit more reason than that.

However, Harry wasn't going to spend too much time wondering about what was happening with Prince. After the match, and the party, when Harry next found free time, he dragged Ron, Neville, and, as a bit of an afterthought, Hermione down with him to Hagrid's. Hermione was really smart; she'd be able to think up plenty of answers to their problems.

Hagrid happily allowed them inside, and Harry smiled and thanked him profusely.

"I've never had any visitors down 'ere for a long while. What are you little brats up ta?"

"Well, I wanted to see what was in this hut down here, and you seem like someone fun to talk to. I'll bet you get to see loads of stuff as groundskeeper!" Harry returned, looking like he was just bubbling with excitement. Ron was watching him as though he'd never seen him before, and Hermione herself looked shocked. Neville was snickering quietly, and Harry sent him a dark look from the corner of his eyes but Hagrid didn't seem to notice. He was ecstatic that Harry had expressed his interest.

"Why, there're loads of wonderful creatures in the forest, but I wouldn't want you going in there. Some of 'em might think you're a snack with how small you are."

"Really?" Harry widened his eyes and leaned forward. He certainly wasn't disinterested in the contents of the forest. "What alls in there?"

Hagrid gave Harry a surprisingly shrewd look. "Are you gonna be like your father and try and haul yourself in there, little 'arry?"

Harry sat back and repeated, "My father?" He then put his head in his hands. "Why am I not surprised?"

Neville laughed softly. "Because your dad's a right hellion and your godfather's no better?"

Harry chuckled and ran his hand through his hair. However Neville caught the calculating look in his eye as he spoke. "Well, there is that. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd try and tackle that big dog we found in the castle."

Harry heard Hagrid's chair squeak as he sat up in alarm. "Here now, what big dog in the castle?" He looked worried, and Harry flicked his glance to Hermione. She caught it, and worried her lip before answering.

"The big three-headed dog in the third floor corridor."

"What do you know about Fluffy? You're not supposed to go there." Hagrid scolded.

Ron squeaked. "That monstrosity is named Fluffy?"

"Why am I not surprised?" Harry murmured to Neville. Neville snorted delicately.

Hagrid flushed with indignation. "Fluffy's mine. I bought him off a Greek chappie down in Hogsmeade, and mind you, don't you bother with him. He's in there with Dumbledore's full knowledge."

"Does that include knowing about what's under that trapdoor too?" Neville asked.

Harry grinned and added, plucking the paper from the table. "And is it related to this article as well?" The paper was the report of the break-in at Gringotts, and Harry smiled tightly. He may have looked relaxed, but he really didn't like this gamble.

However, Hagrid quickly flushed with indignation and huffed. "That's not your business now, and don't you come down here asking about this again. The matter is between Dumbledore and – an old friend of his. An old friend. Come now, you get back to the castle then, will you. You don't need to be wandering about poking yer noses where they'll be bit. Shoo." Hagrid shushed them out the door, and Harry turned around, his innocent expression on once more, but trying not to overdo it.

"Can you come back to chat sometime, though? I really would like to hear what sort of stuff's in the forest." He turned to a wry smile then. "And I'd like to hear what sort of stupid stuff my dad got up to, you know."

Hagrid tried to maintain his irritated look, but he crumpled and smiled weakly. "Sure ye can, kid. And bring yer friends. Just don't be pushing after what ye shouldn't, alright?"

"We won't sir, we won't." Harry reassured him, and then, turning, he led the others back up to the castle.

"That was pointless!" Ron whined. "We hardly got anything with your 'innocent look'"

"Quiet Ron." Hermione scolded. "We got a lot of information. We know the dog is indeed guarding something, we know that Dumbledore is involved, and that it relates to the Gringotts break in."

"And we know that Nicholas Flamel is the most likely conspirator." Harry added.

Hermione froze in the entrance hall, and grabbed Harry's shoulder. "How do we know that?"

Harry turned and gave her a smile. "Hagrid emphasized that Dumbledore's friend was old. The only person really older than Dumbledore that would count as a good friend is either Griselda Marchbanks, who my mom says tested Dumbledore on his NEWTs, and Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel. Alchemists. Surely you know about alchemy, and what is most likely being guarded now."

Hermione squeaked her eyes huge. She grabbed Harry's shirt and pulled his face up to her own. "You're joking! Not – You're joking!"

Ron glanced between them, bewildered. "Joking about what? What's alchemy anyways?"

"Advanced Potion making, Ron." Neville returned. "Or at least, that's how you'd see it. Besides, let's continue this upstairs." He gave a clear glance around himself at the students surrounding them, and Harry smirked at Hermione. Hermione glared back, and then hauled him up the stairs to the dorms, making Ron and Neville trail behind, stifling their laughter much as the rest of the student body was at the sight of Hermione dragging Harry off by his collar.

I decided to take pity upon those reading this, and send up a second chapter. One chapter isn't very interesting, so I'll give you this one two weeks early. I am hoping to garner some interest from people, so please review if you enjoyed it. At ... ten reviews, I'll post the next chapter, or in, once again, one month from this update.

Toodle-pip!

Fire and Napalm

Chapter Three

Christmas passed with nary a change nor a whisper so. The dog remained behind the door, Harry went home for Christmas while Ron stayed, and Nanna was ecstatic to have her brother back. It was a normal Potter Christmas: The Longbottoms came over to celebrate, there was butterbeer; firewhiskey for the adults, and most special of all, Harry's father had managed to talk his wife into allowing him to give Harry the invisibility cloak he was so proud of for Christmas. Harry hadn't wanted to let it go all Christmas day, and Nanna and Neville had found it hilarious that he would stroll about the house as a disembodied head because he insisted on wearing it. What had really surprised him, though, was that both he and Neville had received Weasley sweaters for Christmas. It was the first year they had received one, and both of them grinned as they planned to wear them on the trip back to Hogwarts. Harry, however, had ended up handing his down to Nanna after a few days. She had felt very left out, and, as Neville gleefully pointed out, Nanna had him twined around her little fingers. Of course, Neville had lasted even less time when Melanie had demanded that she get her brother's sweater, same as Nanna had. He'd then firmly told Harry to shove it as the other boy laughed and laughed and laughed.

School came back into session, the dog was still behind the door, and the Quidditch match after Christmas was as breathtaking as the first. Harry had spent five minutes rolling with laughter as Ron and Neville told them about the fight they'd gotten into with Draco and his goons, and Hermione told him that Prince and Blaise Zabini had been sitting together not too far away, and both of them had laughed and jeered at the fight, keeping quiet enough to not draw attention to themselves, but loud enough that she'd noticed. Harry was annoyed that Prince was laughing at his friends, but he supposed whatever worked, did. It's not like Prince was ever going out of his way to do something against him. He was just ... there.

However, things grew several times warmer when Easter break came around, and Hermione began to press them about studying. Harry and Neville both glanced between each other and pretended to humour her. Ron felt slightly left out as Harry and Neville appeared to be studying with each other while they were in the library, until he

finally looked over their shoulders and found them to be playing hangman on the paper between them. Harry quickly defended that they were using it as a memory tool, but since the present word was ‘Holyhead Harpies’ it didn’t hold much water. Ron felt gleeful that they’d be joining him in the torture up until they both turned and glared at him. He then choked slightly, and ducked his head, turning a rather fine shade of pink. However, their attention was diverted when Neville noticed Hagrid’s presence.

“Hagrid! What are you doing here in the library? I didn’t think you’d be much of one for books!”

Hagrid jumped and rather firmly moved to hold something behind his back. “Shh, what are you doing in here? Not still poking yer noses where ye shouldn’t?”

They’d visited Hagrid a few times in between, but Harry had been a little careless and brought the subject up again during the last visit. Hagrid had, irritated, made them leave before he even finished telling his story about James Potter and a prank involving soap and Lily’s backpack. Now, however, Ron quickly smiled.

“We figured that out the first time you told us, the dog – Ye-ouch! Hermione!”

“Quiet!” Hermione hissed, echoed by Harry, Neville and Hagrid all together. Ron flushed and fell silent.

Harry turned back to Hagrid. “Enough of that, what are you doing here? You don’t really seem one for books, you know.”

Hagrid glanced about, and then hissed down at them. “Come to my hut later; I won’t necessarily tell you, but I don’t want to say it here, fer sure.” Hagrid hustled out of the library, and Harry glanced at Hermione, Ron, and Neville with a stubborn look. He stood, and quickly slipped into the section Hagrid had been in. He came back with a small pile of books in his arms.

“Dragons.” Harry hissed. “He’s been looking at Dragon books. I think a dragon would be a wonderful pet in his eyes, wouldn’t it?”

Neville glanced at the books and swallowed hard. Hermione looked mildly confused, but Ron shook his head quickly. “Dragon breeding is illegal.”

Her mouth made a small ‘o’ and she quickly stacked her books with the rest of them as they hurried down to find Hagrid.

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“He’s insane!” Hermione ranted as soon as they got back upstairs. Harry was nibbling at his fingernails, a nervous habit, and he rolled his eyes at her exuberance.

“Hermione, he’s obsessed. He’s always wanted a dragon.”

“He lives in a wooden house!”

“And he probably won’t notice that that doesn’t agree with a dragon until after it’s been lit on fire several times.” Harry insisted. “We need to think up some way to get the dragon out of there, and it will probably take time. And we need to help Hagrid not get in trouble.”

Neville gave Harry an amused look. “You want to help him out, hm?”

Harry sniffed at him, and turned away. “Only because he knows more about the – the dog. And what it’s guarding.”

Neville just laughed at him, and Harry made a face.

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The egg, as expected, hatched, and Harry and Neville were in quite a fit after they’d caught Malfoy peeking in on the hatching. Both of them were watching him cautiously, but Harry couldn’t help but wonder at the rather worried glances Malfoy took at Prince when he didn’t think Harry was watching him.

Ron and Hermione were, surprisingly, the ones that always seemed to want to check on Hagrid and the fast-growing dragon, and Harry

and Neville tagged along to keep an eye out for trouble. Neville was constantly ribbing Harry about his desire to keep them safe, and finally, Harry hexed Neville in the common room to make him shut up. Several people had been shocked, but Neville had just ridden it out, and came out laughing. He stopped ribbing Harry, though. Finally, Harry sagged with relief when Charlie responded to the letter Harry had sent out almost as soon as he had known, and Charlie had found it highly amusing that Hagrid had a dragon, and he was willing to have his friends bring it to him when they came by. That left Harry about two weeks to talk Hagrid into letting the dragon go. It was surprisingly easy after Ron got himself bit.

However, although Ron had been poisoned, it was a fairly decent week altogether. Neville was more than willing to help, and Harry would rejoice when they no longer had to worry about a prowling Malfoy who seemed bound and determined that they were up to no good. Just because they were, wasn't reason to stalk them!

As things would go, though, the crate found its way up to the tallest tower easy enough – it wasn't until they were on the way down and back out that they ran into trouble. Harry and Neville were strolling down the corridor under the cloak, trying not to laugh with relief, when out of nowhere some small and dark student ran into them and swore loudly. Hurriedly, Harry wrenched the cloak off him and Neville and glared at the perpetrator. His breath stuck in his throat as he found himself looking at Prince.

"You little twat! Get off me before we get in –" Harry glanced up in time to see Filch glare down at both of them, and he grumbled the end of his sentence with a grimace. "Trouble."

Prince stood and brushed himself off, his face as ugly as Harry's was. "I think we're already in trouble. I wouldn't have run into you without that being in the way."

Harry's blood ran cold as he realised that Prince now knew about the invisibility cloak, and he gave him a burning glare. Their staring contest, however, was interrupted when Filch stepped between them, pushing Harry out of the way as he snatched the cloak off of a squeaking Neville.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? Three boys out of bed with a rather interesting artefact. I think we'll see you three to a teacher, won't we, and this," He shook the silver invisibility cloak, "will be confiscated."

"You can't do that!" Harry shouted. If there were anything he wouldn't allow to happen, he wouldn't lose an heirloom! "That's mine, you can't take it! There's nothing wrong with it." He flushed, then, noting that that wasn't the best argument he could've made. He swallowed. "You can't confiscate it for yourself. If you're taking it away, you have to send it back to my family; that's Potter property." And my dad will likely send it back, so long as mom doesn't run into it.

Filch leered at him. "I think I've confiscated enough of your father things he's never managed to get back that I doubt you'll have any more luck. Now then, we've got the matter of punishment to settle. You're all out very late, you know ..."

Harry followed with a sinking feeling in his gut, but he quickly kicked himself and gained a mutinous look. His father wasn't a prankster for nothing. Even if he had no inclination for it himself, he could most certainly find out how to get his invisibility cloak back, very easily. He wouldn't let this hold him back for long.

A hundred points later, however, and one promised, nasty detention, Harry wasn't feeling so hot anymore. Well, actually, he felt about ready to melt into the floor and hide and neither Prince, nor Neville look like they felt any better. The only good thing about what had come about was that Slytherin was in the same pickle they were, with two students in shame and a hundred points down. If looks could kill, each of them would have dropped dead at least twice over, except that Malfoy seemed as angry with Prince as he was with Harry and Neville. Which, considering the look he received in turn, it was a mutual hatred that probably didn't concern any outside source.

The reception they received in Gryffindor was rather cold, though, as everyone looked at them as though they couldn't believe what had happened. The sons of two outstanding, Gryffindor aurors, as well as their Quidditch star, had just lost them the House Cup. However, the

mitigating force was that Slytherin was in the same pickle. So, instead of being harped at, Harry and Neville were merely ignored and they both ducked their heads and set about studying. However, Harry, determined to the point of recklessness, wasn't just sitting quiescent as they waited for the storm to blow over. No, he was looking into how he could get his cloak back and he didn't care what the house thought of him over that. Nothing was turning him back from that.

"Harry, you're going to lose us more points if you're caught." Neville whined. Harry was once again muttering to himself under his breath in some unintelligible way, as he wrote quickly on his paper, only glancing at what he was working on occasionally. A glance proved Neville right: Harry was once again planning on how to retrieve his invisibility cloak. Although Neville could understand his temper, he really didn't think the idea was exactly smart. Harry, however, was determined to get his way, and Neville had long ago learned to not try and stop him. When he did get in a mood, Harry could make his dad yelp like a stung dog.

Harry continued writing as though he hadn't even heard Neville, and Neville subsided in his seat, shrugging over at Ron and Hermione, who both sagged and went back to work.

It was the end of that week that Harry set his plan in action, and he darted out of the common room before curfew, smiling and waving a folded parchment at the others to make them think he was sending a letter. Once outside, he made his way carefully downstairs, acting completely nonchalant, and smiling brightly at anyone he ran across. Finally, he found what he was looking for: Peeves. Harry smiled up at him and called softly, "Peeves. I've got a deal for you."

The poltergeist looked at him with interest and cocked an eyebrow. "Ooo, ickle-firstie. Looking for trouble with little Peeves?"

"Looking for Peeves to make a little trouble. I want to ruffle Filch's coat, but I need him out of his office. I want to make a deal. What do you want in return?"

Peeves stared at him for a moment, and then cackled with glee. "I'm liking this plot little firstie. But what can you do for me?"

Harry smirked. "Several things. I can help, I can buy things for you; I can do several things. If you want a potion, or some prank items, or anything. Or, since I'm going into Filch's office, I could give you a few things from there that you might make chaos with."

Peeves looked thoughtful for a moment, and then cackled long and hard before he swooped around, and leaned down to offer his hand to Harry. "You have a deal, firstie. I want three drawers of whatever from Filch's office. Place them just outside his door for me, contents intact. And also," Peeves took on a wry grin. "I want an everlasting bottle of ink."

Harry grinned and bowed, ignoring the offered hand. "You have yourself a deal. Keep him out of his office for fifteen minutes or more, and I'll do it. You'll have to wait a bit for the ink bottle though; I don't know where I'll get one of those."

Peeves grinned wolfishly. "You'll get it to me before the end of the year; else you'll be ratted out."

"But only then." Harry returned, ignoring the cold sweat on his back. Maybe Fred and George can get it for me from Hogsmeade ...

Peeves cackled wickedly, and swooped through the wall, shouting and singing and making a racket. Harry raced out of the room and down the hallways. It wasn't far to Filch's office, and although Filch wouldn't be there, that didn't mean he wouldn't run into anyone else. Getting out would be fairly easy; he'd be invisible then. But getting there ... Harry slowed his pell-mell pace to walk by a Hufflepuff prefect, smiling wanly and then ducking into Filch's office. The prefect gave him a sympathetic look, and Harry just ducked inside. That had been the best bit of advice he'd ever gotten from Sirius: People will assume whatever so long as you look like what you're doing is proper. However, he was in Filch's office now; he just needed to find what he was looking for.

There were several filing cabinets in the room, and Harry needed to get three drawers out for Peeves, and then find his cloak. However, the file 'Confiscated and Highly Dangerous' certainly caught his

attention. It was likely his cloak would be in there, and that it would cause Merry Hell if Peeves were to scatter the contents. Of course, there was also the fact that if what was pulled doesn't cause Merry Hell, he might still snitch, so the drawer was removed and Harry glanced inside. Within, was indeed the invisibility cloak, but beneath it was a small metal contraption that looked vaguely familiar. Convinced that it was something, Harry pulled it out and looked it over. On the bottom was the inscription 'Alan Prince, from 'The Godfather'' Harry wondered what the Hell Prince had been doing with something like this anyways, but on a whim, Harry placed it in his pocket anyways. A glance around found several other drawers marked, and one on 'detention records' and another of confiscated items joined the first on the floor. A glance outside proved it to be past curfew, and the hall was deserted. Quickly, Harry put on the cloak and pushed the drawers out of the door and into the hallway, the 'Confiscated and Highly Dangerous' drawer on top. With a mildly longing glance inside, Harry left, darting back up the hall and heading for Gryffindor tower, keeping an eye out for anyone coming out at him. He didn't want to run into someone again. He'd lost enough popularity.

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Filch was furious the next morning, and nearly foaming at the mouth. Harry was one of the last to hear of what Peeves had gotten up to with the drawers, and when he did hear, he almost regretted handing them over. Almost.

"Papers everywhere! All of them burning! I hear that file held almost all of the records of Fred and George, too! That's why it was so huge." Harry heard as he came down. Neville was waving his arms frantically, and grinning so wide his face seemed ready to split. He turned as soon as Harry came in, and grabbed his arms to drag him over to himself. He looked Harry over for a moment, and Harry nodded fractionally. His smile seemed to do the impossible and grow wider. He then hollered loudly, and smiled back over at Ron and Hermione. "Did you hear about it, Harry? Three drawers of Filch's stuff went missing; two of them confiscated items and one full of records! Everyone thinks its Fred and George, because all of their records were in it. Peeves dumped the papers all over the Great Hall; they're still cleaning them up, and some of them got burned."

Harry rubbed his eyes, and then shook his head. "Filch is going to be livid."

"He already is." Neville laughed. "Fred and George have already been yelled at, but now they're indignant because they didn't pull it off and they want to know who managed to shunt the blame to them."

Harry forced a laugh. He did not want a prank war with the twins. He had just wanted his cloak back, and he wanted to know what this thing of Prince's was. It was boxy and black, with a handle and a long mouth. He couldn't remember where he'd seen it before, he was fairly sure it was dangerous and that the small lever between the handle and the upper part was not to be pulled. He hadn't looked it over for long, though; he'd rather quickly put it away, wondering if he should keep it or return it and how to return it if he did. What was he supposed to do, walk up to Prince and hand it to him? Slip it into his bag during potions? Leave it in the hallway when he was walking by?

Harry rubbed his eyes and asked Neville, "What classes do we have today?"

Neville gave him a long look. "Potions, what do you think? Unless, of course, one of those drawers finds its way down there. They haven't found the other two that were missing, you know."

"Great, that sounds promising. Peeves with two drawers of confiscated items. Wonderful." Harry rubbed at his face, and Neville then poked him, an odd look on his face that was mirrored in Hermione, though not Ron.

"No one thinks Peeves ran off with them, you know. He couldn't get into Filch's office; someone had to have helped him."

Harry glanced around them, and then grimaced when no one was close enough to forestall the conversation. "Look, I wanted my cloak back and I didn't want to lose more points. I need to talk to Fred and George as it is, because I wanted insurance that Filch wasn't going to catch me. So, I paid off Peeves to keep him busy and the drawers were part of the payment. I need to get him an everlasting ink bottle

now, so if you'll excuse me." Harry stood and left, barely hearing Ron behind him mutter 'Absolutely barmy. Making deals with Peeves, framing my brothers defying Filch and McGonagall ...'

Harry came abreast of the irritated Fred and George, their friend Lee looking between the two annoyed twins. When he coughed, they glanced down at him, and Harry smiled brightly at them. "Hey, I know you two are pranksters and you like jokes ... what would you do if I said I never meant to frame you?"

It was a risk, but as the twins gaped at him, he knew it was a small risk. The two of them would likely be more impressed than anything, and when they broke into large smiles, Harry felt very relieved.

"You broke into Filch's office?" One asked.

Harry shrugged. "He took my cloak, and I wasn't going to lose an heirloom."

The twins glanced at each other, and one whistled as the other smiled. "Well then, that's a mighty piece of work you've pulled off there. We admit to being impressed. Why are we getting the fall?"

Harry shrugged. "I just grabbed drawers at random. Honestly, as if anyone wouldn't want to look in 'Confiscated and Highly Dangerous'? And I made a deal with Peeves, so I need you guys to buy me an everlasting bottle of ink next Hogsmeade weekend else I'll be ratted out."

Fred and George looked between each other and George reached into his bag and pulled out an ink bottle, handing it over. "Here you go, one everlasting bottle. It's not shatterproof, mind, but for a boy of your talents, I'm sure it'll be fine. It'd be a waste for such a wonderful prank to be ruined."

"Thanks." Harry smiled, and double-checked the label and the seal before leaving. It was unopened, and, of course, full, with an accurate label. Besides that, if he gave Peeves a pranked bottle, he was just as likely to be amused as anything else. It certainly wouldn't harm his chance of being ratted out, so long as he handed over something

resembling the agreement. He just hoped nobody else tried anything with him.

Before heading down to breakfast, Harry darted upstairs and fetched Prince's –whatever- out of his side table, intending to return it once it came time for Potions. Of course, he had to arrive there earlier than Prince. His luck just wasn't running well today, since he'd spilled his cup at breakfast, and been beaten to the last apple by Dean. So, class started, and Prince barely arrived before Snape, coming in, sitting in his customary seat at the back, and looking unusually tired. Prince rarely ever looked anything but in top shape, and perfectly attentive. Instead, today he appeared to be more tired than anything, slouching at his seat, and not really paying attention.

Whap

"Mr. Potter, do you feel you are free from having to listen to your teachers today?"

Harry pulled himself from his thinking and glared back at Snape, straightening in his seat and facing forward. No, today was not his day.

In fact, nothing really went well until much later in the day, when he finally ran into Prince in the hallway. He'd had to orchestrate that, but not by much as Prince was walking without looking where he was going. Thus, Harry ran into him and made a point of spilling his bag, and accidentally ripped Prince's as well. Prince, as expected, lit into him with an impressive array of curses. Harry pulled together all of his stuff, purposefully leaving out Prince's item. Prince pushed him out of the way once he saw Harry had all his stuff, leaning down to get his own, but he froze for a moment when he saw the black –whatever.

"Potter, what the hell ..." He looked it over, and froze once more when he glanced at the bottom where Harry knew the inscription was.

Harry frowned. "What are you griping about? That's all your stuff there. I need to get a move on; I don't know about you, but I have homework."

Prince nodded mechanically, shoving the item into his pocket and continuing to gather his things. Harry ignored the strange looks his friends were giving him and continued on his way. He just hoped Prince wouldn't report him. Maybe he'd think he'd just found it once Peeves had left it somewhere? That had been most of what had been happening with the contents of those drawers: the items in question were being ditched randomly throughout the halls, and more often than not, an item would be picked up and pocketed before anyone could say a word against it. Hopefully he'd think that.

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The next week was bright and sunny first off. Peeves had been happy to receive his ink bottle, and he'd handed off some strange contraption to Harry that Harry had rather quickly ditched in a corner. It had tried to bite him!

However, they were soon issued a summons to their detention at eleven o'clock, and as far as he could tell, it would be with one very pissed off Filch. Glad that Filch was no longer allowed to use thumbscrews, whips, or chains on students, Harry accepted the ruling and went as he was ordered. Filch met them all and simply glared at them as though he'd be able to divine their secrets through sight. Prince appeared unperturbed; Malfoy, arrogant, and Harry stood calmly next to Neville.

Filch tried to intimidate them once more, but no matter what he said, it was all in past tense. He didn't even sound happy about their detention, and when Harry saw they were heading towards Hagrid's, he was rather pleased with the ruling instead. He kept his face calm, though, and Filch sneered before handing them over. However, when Hagrid detailed their task of entering the forest, Neville paled and Draco whimpered.

"I'm not going in there!" Draco insisted. Hagrid glowered.

"Ye are if you want to remain in Hogwarts. You don't get away with breaking the rules, Malfoy, so keep that in mind."

Prince snickered, and Malfoy glared at him as Neville swallowed hard, and Harry eyed the forest nervously.

“Now, look there.” Hagrid led them towards the forest and pointed down a path. Harry looked, and squinted as he saw that there was something silvery glinting on the ground. He took a moment, and then he pulled back in revulsion.

“Unicorn blood!” Prince whispered, sounding disgusted. Hagrid nodded sadly.

“Aye, and this is going to be dangerous. Don’t be doing anything stupid, then, young ‘uns, and listen up. We’re going looking for this unicorn; it’s the second one in two weeks. I found one dead last Wednesday. We’re going to look for it, and we may have to put it out of its misery.”

“And what if what hurt the unicorn finds us first?” Malfoy whimpered, frightened half to death.

“Nothing in the forest will hurt you if yer wit me or fang.”

Harry found that that wasn’t the most comforting thing Hagrid had ever said.

“We’re gonna split into two parties and follow the path in different directions. There’s blood all over the place; it’s been staggering aroun’ for a long time.”

“I want Fang.” Malfoy insisted.

“Alright, but I warn yeh, he’s a coward.” Malfoy paled and Prince rolled his eyes, running his hand down over the pocket of his robe.

“Draco, you’re a wuss. Stick with Hagrid, and I’ll go with the bloody dog already.” Malfoy turned to glare at him, but Prince just met his eyes unfailingly. “Well,” Prince grinned. “I wouldn’t mind watching you ruin another set of robes.”

Malfoy flushed and turned away while Prince looked back at Hagrid. "I'm with Fang." Prince stated, Malfoy glaring daggers at his profile but saying nothing.

Hagrid looked Prince over and then nodded. "Alright then, Draco and Neville are with me, and Alan 'n Harry will go wit' Fang."

Harry looked over at Prince and found himself feeling weighed and judged by his eyes. Harry met his look unfailingly and Prince gave him a small nod.

"Now, if we find the unicorn, send up green sparks. If yeh run inter trouble, send up red sparks, and I'll come and find yeh, alright?"

Harry and the others followed and when they came to a split, he went down the right path with Prince and Fang. They walked in silence for the trip, watching for the splash of silvery blood on the path. Finally, Prince lit his wand with *lumos* and crouched to study the ground. Harry watched him with interest. Finally, Prince swore and stood once more, waving Harry along without a word.

"Hey, Prince." Harry spoke up. Prince glanced back at him, and Harry frowned. "What were you looking at? When you crouched."

Prince frowned in turn and waved Harry to keep up, looking away for a moment before he looked back at him from the sides of his eyes.

"I was looking for tracks. I'm not very good at it, though, so I couldn't figure much out. I think someone else walked down here, and they weren't Hagrid or a kid, but that much was pretty obvious."

Harry glanced down and, after a few minutes, he saw what Prince had been talking about. There were some footprints that were really very obvious on the soft ground, smaller than Hagrid's but larger than a kid's. "I see." He let the conversation die, and they continued to look, not really finding anything of note. However, Prince seemed to be growing uncomfortable, and his left hand had slipped into his pocket, seemingly loath to leave whatever he had within.

"Potter?" He queried quietly. Harry glanced over, keeping his face open. Prince looked at him and licked his lips nervously. "Thanks. For returning that."

"For returning what?" Harry asked, before blushing and feeling stupid. However, he let it stand. He wanted to know what that had been.

"My –my BB-gun."

Harry paused, and then smacked his forehead. "A gun! That's what it was. I could never remember." Prince was giving him a weird look, so Harry just smiled. "It's fine, you're welcome and I'm not about to mention it. I just hadn't been able to place what it was; I've never been very interested in muggle toys."

Prince gave him another look that made him think he'd said something really stupid, and then turned back to following the trail. They didn't get far before they were passed by something that whispered over the leaves. Prince froze, and, glancing nervously at Harry, pulled his gun from his pocket and aimed it comfortably at the trees around them. Harry copied him, using his wand, and thinking that Prince really had the right idea at the moment; he couldn't think of any spells that would be really discouraging to an attacker that could kill a unicorn, and having something reliable would have really been useful. Then again ...

"Is ... is that thing deadly?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Not this one, no. Most guns are, but this is a little kid's one, that fires ball bearings. They'll hurt, might take out an eye, but you could do as much with a wand in the hand of a muggle." Prince returned.

Harry paused and thought that a gun was a little more dangerous, even if it was supposedly a 'kids' one. "Whoever raised you was nuts."

"Thanks."

Harry shook his head at Prince's audacity, and then nudged him with his shoulder, tilting his head along the path they were following.

Prince made a slight face, but they both set off, Prince keeping his gun in hand. Harry took a look at the tree roots, thinking that Prince had the right idea about tracks, but he found that the human tracks, or what they'd taken for them, were gone. Instead, there were delicate looking tracks of cloven hooves, and great splashes of silvery blood that made Harry think it was rather horrible, what had been done to the poor creature. Prince's tight face revealed nothing, and Harry grimaced once more, feeling rather glad he hadn't become a Slytherin and been compelled to keep so calm all the time. He rather liked being emotional; it made communicating a lot easier.

They soon came upon a clearing in the forest, and Prince flinched before throwing his hand out to make Harry stop. They both approached the clearing warily, and there on the ground was the unicorn, its white coat gleaming, and sprawled brokenly. It was clearly very dead. Prince glanced around the area, and stepped warily out of the tree line, his eyes roving restlessly. Harry couldn't take his eyes off the beautiful creature lying dead before him, but when he heard Prince scream he turned abruptly, staring at the other student. He had his hand pressed to his face, panting harshly, and Harry looked back over the clearing – and froze.

The slithering sound had returned, and a bush across the clearing was trembling. Out of the leaves, came a dark, cloaked figure, which glanced over at them, and then knelt next to the unicorn and bent to drink its blood. Harry watched with a horrible fascination, and he finally moved slowly over to Prince's side. Prince was breathing in short pants, holding his face still and his hand twitched reflexively on his gun. Harry couldn't imagine what was wrong with him, but he would be damned if he left a fellow student to fend for themselves, against that kind of –of thing.

Finally, however, the creature looked over at them with a fierce glare, blood dripping down its face. Harry felt ill, but he firmly grabbed Prince's shoulder and pulled him to his feet. Prince wrenched away from him, barely keeping his feet as he staggered off, and then he looked flat out at the creature. He seemed to respond without thinking, and Harry dove for cover as Prince's gun went off, doubling the creature over as they hit their mark. The gun discharged only three times before Prince swallowed audibly and then grabbed at Harry's

hand. Harry didn't waste time; he stood and hauled Prince with him back onto the trail, running for all he was worth. They were off for about ten minutes before Harry remembered to send up red sparks. After he did so, Harry just collapsed to the ground, Prince remaining standing, staring into the forest with wide eyes and breathing hard. Harry placed his head on his knees and stayed there, shaking slightly. This had turned out a mess.

Once again I shunt the update up two weeks. A month just seems too long. Be grateful. Second year has been finished, and so it will be posted after first. Unless I get inundated with reviews, the chapters will likely consistently go up in two weeks stints until the end of second year. Then, depending on how complete the next is, I may or may not take a break until the next is comfortably outfitted.

More reviews mean I know you love me, and more inspiration to work.
Please Read and Review.

Chapter Four

After the mess in the forest, which had ended with Hagrid and the others finding them and then a trip back out, with Prince practically jumping at every little sound in contrast to his earlier nonchalance, it came time for exams. Harry took them as they came, doing the studying Hermione pushed on him, and glaring at Neville who just smiled and grinned at him as he barely studied at all and still managed to complete his tests in utter comfort. It was one thing that Harry had always disliked about Neville. That, and Neville and Hermione both would talk and talk and talk about their opinions of the exams and the questions they'd had to answer, something that usually made Ron feel more than a little green.

After History of Magic, their last exam, Harry and Ron shook off Hermione and Neville and wandered to the lakeside, resting comfortably on the shore as they simply soaked up the sun. Ron didn't seem interested in talking, and Harry was simply enjoying knowing there weren't any more classes. Harry broke the silence himself.

"Ron, you going to try out for the Quidditch team next year?"

Ron spun in place and gaped at Harry. "Holy ... where did that come from? Harry, I'm no good at Quidditch!"

Harry stuck out his tongue. "Nonsense, you're grand. And if you're not, if you try out you can get practice." Ron glanced nervously away and grumbled under his breath. Harry sat up, not having caught it. "What has you in a pickle?"

Ron didn't answer, but a shadow fell over both of them and Harry looked up, and smiled. "Hello Hagrid."

"How ya doin', Harry. I was wonderin' if it was ye two over here. Where's Neville and Hermione?"

Harry smiled. "Library, debating over whether they got the questions wrong or not. Likely, Neville is leaning his chair back and laughing while Hermione is still tense. I already fried my brain with the tests, so

I didn't want to talk about them again." Harry shuddered in distaste and Ron laughed.

Hagrid smiled down at them. "I could make you a cuppa tea if you want to come down to my hut."

"Sure Hagrid." Harry pulled Ron to his feet and they both tailed the groundskeeper to his hut. Once seated and enjoying the warm tea and artfully ignoring the rock cakes, Harry sighed comfortably, and then frowned. "Hagrid, is everything still okay in the forest?"

Hagrid shifted and gave Harry a weak smile. "Yeah, it's all sittin' right for now. No strangeness other than the centaurs commenting on the brightness of Mars. Silly stargazers. Nope, nothing even as interesting as Norbert."

Harry blinked and shook his head, thinking it would take quite a bit for something to match Norbert for interesting.

Harry rolled his eyes and tipped back his tea again, and Ron smiled. "Charlie's said Norbert fits in well, although he's got some interesting habits. Likes ripping blankets and cloth, and chewing on hard stuff, but he's really into music."

Hagrid smiled widely. "Course he is, that's one of my favourite ways to calm him down. Works on most every big creature I've met, from Norbert to Fluffy. Goes right off to sleep, Fluffy does." Hagrid's eyes then widened and he glared down at the two of them. "Ye're not to repeat that, boys. I didn't say that."

Harry put on an innocently confused look. "I didn't hear anything, Hagrid. Just you talking about Norbert." Ron rapidly nodded in agreement, looking vaguely pale. "However, chances are Hermione and Neville are a done their discussion and it'll be good to go see them. I won't say a thing to them, Hagrid, promise. The tea was wonderful."

Ron simply went along with Harry and Harry quickly pulled him out, much to Hagrid's relief. Once they were outside, Harry's face firmed and he took off at a flat out run for the castle, Ron by his side. Once

they were at the doors, panting for breath and Ron was feeling mildly ill, he panted out,

“What was that for, Harry? He said he’d never told anyone.”

Harry turned on him, “You think that’s safe to assume? He never meant to tell us, and he just did! What are the chances he hasn’t let it slip to anyone else? Would you rely on that? I did say I wouldn’t say anything, though, so I just want to run everything else by Hermione and Neville again to see if they are seeing the same patterns I am. This just isn’t cool, Ron, this just isn’t. We shouldn’t know word one, and yet ... we know too much.” Harry stalked down the corridor, heading firmly for the library while Ron jogged to his side and walked quietly beside him.

“We don’t know everything, though.”

“It’s not hard to guess. Later, though.”

Ron nodded, and kept his silence until they were up several floors and making their way through the library. Finally, frustrated, Harry attempted to whistle for them, but couldn’t manage the sound. Which proved a good thing, as they ran into Madam Pince not two shelves later. She frowned down at both of them, but Harry just smiled brightly at her.

“Good afternoon, Madam Pince. May I ask if you’ve seen Hermione and Neville around?”

Madam Pince looked them both over as though checking for guilt, but apparently found nothing substantial and instead merely sniffed disdainfully. “They are over in the corner of Transfiguration and Potions, both talking politely and quietly.” She glared at them. “Now then, you may join them if you will do the same.”

“Yes Madam Pince.” Harry gave a properly contrite look and then grabbed Ron’s hand and hurried him off to the corner as well, trying hard to not snicker. They found Hermione and Neville shortly, and Neville stood immediately and grabbed Harry’s arm.

"Harry, I was glancing through here and I saw Quirrel acting really weird as he looked through the higher level Transfiguration stuff. He was hunched really badly, as though he couldn't stand straight. He saw me, so I asked if he was alright and he just passed it off as stomach cramps. I will say those must be nasty stomach cramps."

Harry felt his own stomach tie itself in knots and swallowed hard. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, but he didn't quite want to put the pieces together yet. He was still being cautious. "Neville, sit down. We have to talk this out."

As Harry, Ron, and Neville sat, Hermione worriedly put her book away and frowned. "You're not going to be ..."

"Hermione, what do you remember of what we've put together? About ... about Fluffy." Harry chanced. Hermione opened her mouth, and Harry stopped her. "Could you write it up or something, or ... I don't want to be overheard."

Hermione pouted, but quickly pulled out a parchment and began to write quickly. Harry was trying to put his own thoughts together, but shock kept creeping in and making them scatter.

"Here." Hermione returned, and slipped the paper over. Harry glanced down the list and swallowed.

-Fluffy on the third floor; both Quirrel and Snape tried to get past on Halloween

-Fluffy is Hagrid's, guarding a trapdoor and something from Gringotts

-Gringotts was broken into for whatever object

-Dumbledore and 'an old friend' know of object, and protection

-'Old friend' might be Nicholas Flamel, object Philosopher's stone

"So we don't know much according to this." Neville returned. "Why are you asking?"

Harry ignored him and fixed Hermione with a look. “You remember what a – what’s hidden can do?”

Hermione fluffed some. “It can turn any substance into gold and produce the Elixir of Life, which will sustain life indefinitely so long as the elixir is available.”

“Alright, and what does Unicorn’s blood do?”

Everyone froze, and Harry continued.

“Unicorn’s blood will keep you alive too; not immortal, but alive. Even from the brink of death, I think. You’ll be cursed something horrible, but alive in the barest sense.” Harry frowned. “Whoever it was who was killing the unicorn’s was drinking their blood. And Prince got them bad – right in the stomach.” Neville paled and gaped. “So isn’t it funny that we know Quirrel’s gone after this,” Harry tapped the paper, “and he’s got some stomach cramps right now? Having the Elixir will free him from the unicorn’s blood, I’ll bet.”

Hermione was pale and her hands were fluttering around her mouth. Ron didn’t seem capable of proper speech, but he was swallowing convulsively and shivering.

“You sure of that, mate?” Ron asked. “It sounds … I don’t know, it sounds utterly barmy. Who would do that?”

“Who’d kill a unicorn?” Neville returned. “But really, what the hell can we do?”

Harry bit his lip. “We can tell a teacher. I’ll bet they all know about ‘it’, or at least some of them. Professor McGonagall is definite, and Snape. I don’t think Fluffy is the only thing guarding the stone, so they’re probably in on it as well, and who knows, maybe Quirrel too.” Harry bit his thumbnail and worried it in his mouth. “But I don’t know how he managed to get hired with this … this … these issues. I mean, Dumbledore has to know, but how can he let him stay? Unless he doesn’t know, but how can he not know?” Harry bent his head and pulled his glasses off, rubbing his eyes. “I’m so confused.”

Hermione frowned. "Harry, if the teachers know, then they can take care of it."

Harry snarled, "Hermione, a teacher is the problem. Do you really think he'd still be here if they knew he was a problem? We'll just ... have to tell someone. Make sure they know, just to be sure."

Ron spoke up, "I think Dumbledore should be in. We could tell him, I'm sure. Then we'd know for certain it was safe."

"But Ron, we're not supposed to know!" Hermione gasped.

Neville laughed, "I think they probably know we know. If Hagrid can't keep a secret he's not supposed to tell from us, he probably told Dumbledore we know already."

Hermione worried her lip. "Then why hasn't Dumbledore done anything?"

"Hermione, we're first years." Harry drawled. "No one will believe first years, and we don't even know enough magic yet to really speak of anyways."

Hermione looked mildly insulted, but she didn't argue the point. Quickly they gathered their things and walked out into the corridors before Harry frowned and sighed. All three of his friends looked at him expectantly, and he smiled sheepishly.

"I have no clue where Professor Dumbledore's office is."

However, after a few wanderings, they ran into the next person on their list: McGonagall. She looked down at them and frowned before coldly asking, "What do you think you're doing inside? It's a wonderful day out there."

Harry smiled thinly. "Professor McGonagall, I'm sorry to ask this but we need to speak to Headmaster Dumbledore."

McGonagall's eyebrow rose. "And why would you need that?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Well, we have ... Well, I'm a little nervous because of something I noticed. Professor Quirrel ... you know my detention with Hagrid a few days ago or so?" McGonagall nodded. "Prince defended himself against the creature in a cloak that was attacking the unicorn, and recently ... Quirrel seemed hurt and it was his stomach. Prince's –spell hit the cloak in the stomach and the parallel ... it's just unnerving me."

McGonagall watched him curiously and looked him over thoroughly. Harry was flushed and shifting uncomfortably, wishing desperately that she would believe him. She finally sighed and tutted gently.

"Mr. Potter, each member of the staff was hired by Dumbledore personally and should have your utmost respect." McGonagall raised her hand to stave off the angry swelling of Hermione and Neville behind Harry and Harry rammed his heel onto Neville's foot. "However, I will mention your concerns to him when he gets back."

Harry whipped his head around to stare at her in horror. "Back? He's gone? Where can he have gone?"

McGonagall flushed, irritated. "Mr. Potter," She scolded briskly, "Headmaster Dumbledore is a very busy man and has many demands on his time. The minister requested an urgent meeting and he will be out of the school until this evening. I assure you, there is nothing to worry about in the meantime. If you are most concerned, you may remain in your commons or elsewhere, and need not remain near Professor Quirrel if he makes you nervous, but there is no other cause for panic. Everything is under control."

"But Professor!" Hermione whimpered. "We think he's after the Philosopher's stone!"

Hermione yelped as Neville kicked her in the shin, and Harry spared her a dark look as McGonagall paled.

"How do you know about that?" She demanded. McGonagall then cut them off with a sharp gesture. "Either way, you should not know and shouldn't be speaking of it. I will most certainly see you before Dumbledore when he returns, and hopefully he will be able to quell

your curiosity. The stone is well protected, and I appreciate the concern, but keep it to yourselves. It is in no danger. Now, head back on outside or wherever suits you best, but please keep your nose out of this."

Harry quietly nodded, keeping his foot pressed gently against Hermione's and McGonagall left on her own way, giving them a firm shake of her head. Harry sighed, and then rounded on Hermione.

"Just because they all probably knew we knew, doesn't mean we should be announcing it. What if someone overheard you? Quirrel having a sore stomach isn't exactly the best proof in the world, you know."

A clatter came from down the hall and Harry paled and looked that way. Neville jogged off to look, but came back with a frown.

"No one. Didn't see anything. It didn't sound like too much, maybe a dropped knife or something."

Harry swallowed, and then shook his head. "This isn't cool. Dumbledore's not here. Without Dumbledore here, the first protection against someone going after the stone is gone. And if he goes after it ..."

"We have to go after him!" Ron finished. He flushed as Harry, Neville and Hermione gave him odd looks. "What? We can't let him get that! Who knows what sort of evil he might get up to! I don't think Nicholas just chose to put it here for nothing; people are probably trying to steal it all the time. Quirrel must be someone really evil or something, or he's working for them."

Harry paled so quickly he looked like someone had coated his face with milk. Neville was equally pale and he prodded Harry gently.

"Harry ... it can't ..."

"You wanna bet it can't?" Harry rasped. Ron looked very worried and Hermione was swallowing hard. "Voldemort." Harry whispered.

Neville twitched, and Ron and Hermione both flinched and paled as well. "He ..."

"What do you think you're doing inside on such a ... charming day, Potter? Longbottom, Weasley, Granger."

Harry turned with the others to look up at Snape and felt some colour return to his cheeks as he scowled at his least favourite teacher. "Sorry Professor Snape." Harry mumbled. "We were going over the tests in the library and got distracted on our way outside. We'll be going."

"Indeed. It'd be a right shame to lose even more points from Gryffindor, wouldn't it? Move along, then." Snape briskly walked past and down the corridor without sparing them a second glance. Ron hissed sharply, and Harry and the others looked at him askance.

"I wouldn't be too sure he's not got an accomplice in Snape." Ron spat. "He's foul enough."

Neville shook his head. "No, Quirrel and Snape don't get along. They wouldn't work with each other in the least. I'm sure of it. Quirrel doesn't like any of the other professors that I've noticed. Not even Filch."

Ron huffed, and muttered under his breath as he watched Snape stroll away, and Harry remained still in his own space, hardly breathing as he wondered just what four first years could possibly do.

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Harry couldn't believe Ron and Hermione had talked him into this. Mind, they'd managed to make it all the way to the third floor corridor with his invisibility cloak, but Harry still wasn't convinced this was a good idea. Neville had gone to bother McGonagall so he could see Dumbledore as soon as he returned, but Harry had been overruled by Hermione and Ron's insistence that Quirrel couldn't be allowed to get the stone. The more he thought of what could be done with that, the more he knew he really didn't have much to say against Hermione and Ron.

However, looking at the large creature standing in the middle of the floor over the trapdoor they needed to get at did not make him feet too great about trying to get past the dog with Neville's old recorder. Harry didn't know much about playing, but he could certainly fake a half-decent tune on it.

"You guys aren't going to back down, are you?" Harry whispered, staring at the door that would be quite capable of just shutting everything back. However, he glanced around and found a harp sitting in a corner. When he saw that Ron and Hermione were likely going to back down, Harry pulled the cloak off them and stepped into the room. With proof like that that Quirrel was in there, Harry wasn't going to stop. He started the wavering tune before Fluffy could begin to bark, and then nodded his head that Ron and Hermione needed to come in. Both of them hesitated before walking inside and Ron ran to the trapdoor, wrenching it open even as Fluffy lay down and started dozing. Ron helped Hermione down, and then Ron waved for Harry to go. Harry walked over, and paused, waving Ron down before him.

"It's safe, I think ... it's a soft landing, come down already." Hermione called.

Ron jumped, and Harry waited with bated breath for him to call back up. As soon as he did, Harry stopped and then he gasped as he was struck from behind. He didn't have a chance to cry out, before he stumbled and fell, going down the trapdoor and falling for a long distance. When he landed, someone else was on top of him, and Harry cursed and swore just before Hermione directed her lumos at him and squeaked. Ron hissed.

"What the Hell do you think you're doing, Prince?" He spat.

The person on top of Harry moved back and Harry sat up rubbing his head and glared. However, Prince had rapidly moved off whatever they'd landed on and was looking at them quizzically. Hermione, next to him, squeaked.

"Get off of there! That's Devil's Snare!"

Harry quickly stood, but the Snare was already grabbing at his legs, and he tripped. Hermione grabbed him, but she was chewing her lip as Ron yelled frantically, presently wrapped from his legs to his waist in the thick vines. He was ready to panic when fire erupted next to his feet and the Snare frantically released him, curling away from the glowing flames. Ron as well ran from the flickering fire and swiftly joined them on the floor, glaring.

"What was that for? I could have been burned!"

"That was very nearly the point, Weasley." Prince snapped. Harry and the others all glared at him as they pondered what might have brought Prince of all people to the forbidden corridor. Meeting their eyes he made a tight face and snorted. "You guys aren't the most observant, you know, and neither are you the smartest. But you had a point today, and I need to make sure you're wrong."

Prince glared at them a moment before he moved down the passageway leading forward. Harry glared and ran after him, grabbing his shoulder and holding him back.

"What did you overhear?" Harry demanded.

Prince made a face. "Just Professor McGonagall dismissing you guys. Then you commented that Quirrel had a sore stomach and I dropped my flute. Picked it up and ran off to try and figure out what was going on."

Harry paled. "So, you're as worried about that as I am."

Prince gave Harry a grim smile. "I'm more worried than you are, Potter."

Harry watched him as he paused and observed the next brightly lit room, and then shook his head. Prince apparently knew something more than he was telling, but he wasn't going into it. Deciding it didn't matter, Harry turned and observed the next room as well, wondering what it could be.

"Harry, that sounds like ... wings or something." Hermione asked.

"Flying, enchanted ... something." Prince grumbled. Harry looked at him, but Prince just gave him a look in return. Harry didn't press further; Prince was really good at discouraging people with that look.

"So we're going to have to cross. Think they'll attack?" Harry observed. Hermione behind him was chewing on his lip and Ron looked pale and nervous. Harry swallowed and sighed. "I'll go first then." Covering his head with his arms, Harry ran out into the room and darted to the door. Nothing came after him, and once he was over there, he glanced back up. The flying bird-like things were still where they were, lazily flapping about the room. Harry tried the door, and, when it didn't budge, urged the others out into the room, meeting them in the middle. Prince was already eyeing the brooms in the middle of the room, and he glanced back over to Harry.

"They're keys." He drawled.

A glance up proved him right. The flying things were keys, with brightly coloured feathered wings. Ron was eyeing them oddly, and Harry scowled.

"We need to catch the one that goes to the door, then, and we'll be flying to do so. I think, ..." Harry glanced back at the door and frowned. "One that matches the lock would be what we're looking for, a big hefty silver one. Ummm, Hermione do you mind being left on the ground? Prince is the better flier."

"No, not at all Harry." Hermione laughed weakly. "I don't like flying, and we need to get this done fast."

Harry nodded, and Prince was already mounting a broom. Harry took his and flew into the swarm, followed by Ron. "Call out when you find the key." Harry ordered, hoping Prince would actually listen to him. However, it appeared he was listening as not too long after he did holler out.

"Found it! One with bright blue wings, one's crushed. It's way down here. Potter, come down on it with Weasley and try to catch it.

Weasley, don't let it fly up. I'll trap it at the bottom and sharp eyes can snag it."

Harry quickly glanced down towards him and found the one he was talking about. When Ron looked lost, Harry pointed him in the direction and took off, pressing the broom for speed. As the key tried to fly farther away, Harry frowned and swung after it, taking only a moment before he snatched it out of the air and landed. Quickly, he stuffed it into the keyhole and opened the door before releasing it back to the air with a smile.

"Thanks Prince."

Prince flushed and frowned, not answering and he hung back to let them into the next room first. The lights came on, and all of them gasped at the huge board set up before them, the black chess pieces standing with their backs to them, and the white, faceless but looking their way. Prince swore under his breath, making Hermione yelp, and Ron swallowed.

"So we have to play across?" Ron tried.

Prince snorted again. "Well, you can try that. I'm going to see if I can't find a loophole. I never did like chess."

"Prince, stop!" Harry called. Prince didn't listen, and strode around the edge of the chessboard. Harry watched him, flabbergasted, and nearly swallowed his tongue when Prince stopped abruptly near the other side, just level with the white chess pieces. He placed his hand forward, and as he crossed what seemed to be an invisible line, one of the pawns next to him swiped out with its sword. Hermione screamed, but Prince dropped to his knees and dodged away, his face pale as milk as he hurried back over in their direction. Ron frowned at his return.

"Wasn't that smart, Prince." He sniped.

Prince growled at him. "Knock it off. You would have walked clean through the trigger and gotten all of the pieces after your blood. I was testing a theory."

Harry sighed. "Prince, chances are all the teachers enchanted these. I don't think they'd leave a hole like that, where you can just walk past."

Prince made a face at him. "Some people are just incredibly thick. So, are we doomed or what?"

"Of course not." Ron growled. "I can play use across."

"You're good at chess?" Prince returned, making a face. "I never would have guessed. Well then, lead on. However, if we're taking the place of pieces, I'm King. I don't want to die for your stupidity if I can help it."

Ron made a face at him, but the king had already stepped down to make way for Alan to step into his place. Ron frowned, and studied the board before giving his next command. "Harry, you take the place of that Bishop, and Hermione you take the position of the Castle. I'll be the Knight."

Prince snorted with laughter, but that was the last noise he made as Ron battled his way across the chessboard. At least, until Ron decided to be taken. Prince finally spoke up as Hermione and Harry objected.

"I don't see any other way either, so both of you be quiet. I doubt it'll kill him. You set that up real well, though, Weasley."

Ron looked down at Prince with an expression of surprise until he finally just shook his head and made his move. Ron was struck down, and Harry created Checkmate. Prince was the first to reach Ron's side as the game ended, and he immediately checked his pulse and breathing. Hermione was almost crying beside him, and Prince sighed.

"Granger, he's still alive. Just out cold, and probably he will remain that way for a while. If you want to stay feel free, but you'll probably be useful later on, you know."

Harry nodded beside Prince, and Hermione gathered herself together.

"Right." She sighed. "Let's go, then."

Harry led the way to the next door, with Prince trailing behind. The smell that came one as it opened made all of them hack, and Harry swore under his breath. "Troll." He groaned. A quick check proved the creature unconscious, and Prince was the first to the next door, with Harry and Hermione not far behind. He let Harry open the door and enter first, but as they all approached the table, flames erupted behind them and ahead. It was Prince's turn to swear now, but Harry felt hopeless at the bottles before them.

"Prince, do you know any of these potions?"

Prince shook his head. "They could be anything. Likely, they are disguised from what they really are, and there looks to be a clue over there anyways. Granger, you got that?"

Hermione picked up the paper and read the riddle out loud. Prince looked back at the table in disgust, but he looked hopeful at Hermione's happy expression.

"Oh, this is easy!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Enlighten us, then." Prince drawled. Harry couldn't stop his snort, but he waved Hermione forward as it was. She strolled up and down the table until she had pointed out each of the bottles that would take them forward and back. Prince sniffed each and agreed with her on what he could observe and Harry sighed as he looked over the black fire.

"Hermione, Alan, you two drink the potion to go back and get Ron. Go meet up with Neville and make sure you can tell Dumbledore what's going on. I'll go ahead and head off Quirrel but ... I'm just a kid, okay? Please?"

Hermione looked ready to object, but Prince didn't even look that. He merely gave Harry a single look that told him that Prince wasn't going

to be listening to him. Harry frowned. "Prince, there's only enough for one person to go forward. Unless you want to,"

"No," Prince cut him off. "You go forward. I'll be in here and keep an eye on you to watch." His hand fell to his pocket and suddenly Harry understood. Prince still had his small gun, and very likely he could shoot through the screen of fire. However, Prince continued his set up for Hermione. "I can drink and go back through any time, and I'll be able to help the Headmaster know what's happening, and possibly keep —Quirrel back if something does happen or he gets the stone and tries to run."

Hermione swallowed hard and paled. Harry didn't like the picture Alan painted either, but he nodded slowly to agree, silently hoping that it wouldn't happen. One hand went to the necklace he'd had since a child that would shatter were he to end up in a life-threatening condition, alerting his parents. He hoped it wouldn't break today. He nearly yelled when Hermione suddenly engulfed him in a hug.

"Harry, please be careful." She cried. "You're so much more than either me or Ron and ... we'll bring help down here if we have to. Just hold on, okay?"

Harry nodded numbly, and Hermione pulled away with a blush. Prince wasn't looking at either of them, staring once more through the black fire as though he could see beyond it, and Hermione quickly drank a mouthful of the potion for return and left. Once they were alone, Harry swallowed and sighed.

"You've got your gun, don't you?" He asked. Prince nodded shortly, still looking past the fire. "Can you see past that fire or something?"

Prince blushed and glanced away. "No," He answered quickly, "just looking at it."

Harry felt slightly suspicious of what he wasn't telling him, but he looked back down at the phial in his hand and felt that suspicion melt away. "You're sure you can cover me with that ... gun of yours from over here?"

“Somewhat, yeah.” Prince returned. Harry felt that wasn’t quite the answer he wanted, but he wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing. Still, he paused.

“You’re sure this is the right potion?”

“Hermione’s worked, didn’t it? Quirrel’s not stuck here, is he? I thought you were a Gryffindor, or you at least insisted on being one.”

Harry scowled at the low blow, although he wasn’t surprised Prince knew, and downed the mouthful quickly before he walked past Prince with a confident stride and through the fire. Once he was in the other room, he was less than surprised to find Quirrel standing there, staring at a mirror propped proudly in the centre of the room. Feeling Prince’s eyes incongruously focus on his back strangely gave Harry courage he’d never known he’d had as he stopped where he was and watched silently as Quirrel glared once more at the mirror before him, a mirror that seemed more ornate than it should be, with writing scrawled across the top, ‘Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on woshi’

Quirrel started and looked straight over at Harry, and Harry thought he heard a soft hiss from behind him. It may have simply been the fire, though, and Harry focused on the look that was crossing Quirrel’s face, one of loathing that seemed so out of place on the nervous professor’s expression.

“You.” He growled. “I should have expected you to show up, Potter. You’re just a nosy little brat, flitting around where you shouldn’t be. I half expected it to be Longbottom here, though. Where is he, stuck on the path behind you?”

Harry kept his face clear. He hadn’t expected to be greeted like that, and now he wasn’t sure he knew how he wanted to continue going on. What was he supposed to do now that he was here? Somehow he didn’t think a hair-changing curse was going to help him. In fact, the best thing he could think of right now was running straight back the way he’d come, but the fire was still there and he didn’t think it would like him trying to pass through again.

All in all, Harry had never felt more screwed.

Please Read and Review! Anything is welcome.

Fire and Napalm

Chapter Five

Quirrel was looking at the mirror once more, seeming to ignore Harry. This would have been wonderful, if Harry hadn't been more correct than he ever wanted to be that a first year's education is no good against a full grown wizard. Harry could hardly think of a single spell that would be useful against Quirrel, not even if he delved into the spells his parents had taught him before they should have. The only consolation was that Quirrel was still circling the mirror and muttering to himself, pondering just how he might be able to get the stone. Clearly, it wasn't in plain sight in the room, but how was it stuck inside the mirror? Knowing he needed to keep Quirrel from finding it when he didn't seem to be figuring it out on his own anyways made Harry once more feel useless and stupid in choosing this course of action. But how was he supposed to know that the last clue appeared for all intents and purposes to be completely impossible to accomplish?

Finally getting tired of watching Quirrel, Harry began to back up towards the black fire, hoping that out of sight would become out of mind and that maybe, just maybe he'd be able to get back through. He was almost there when another voice joined Quirrel's mutterings, a high, thin voice coming from apparently nowhere and spoke in such a way Harry couldn't understand the words.

Harry knew he heard a hiss this time, coming from Prince beyond the fire. He didn't think on it long though, as Quirrel suddenly thrust his arm out and yelled, "Come here, boy!"

Harry was caught in the spell and dragged unceremoniously across the room, coming to a standstill in what he could only name the worst place possible: right between Quirrel and Prince in the other room. He could, however, now see awkwardly into the mirror before Quirrel and it was rather surprising to see within it an image of himself: he'd expected it to be enchanted or something. Quirrel stepped out of the way, and Harry found his eyes drawn to the markings above even as he thought of what Hermione had said about the failings of many wizards, in ignoring logic.

‘Erised stra ehru oyt ...’ the first three words seemed stuck in his mind and suddenly the split into their components and made sense. ‘Erised straeh ruoy ... your hearts desire ... I show not your face but your hearts desire’

Harry glanced back into the mirror and watched as his expression looked back at him with an expression of amusement he knew he wasn’t presently wearing. Patiently, the image held out its hand, holding a red stone that it then dropped into its pocket. Harry felt the stone drag on his trousers and felt a thrill of panic he really wished would go away. He didn’t want the stone! He just wanted to know where it was. Apparently, however, it was now within his pocket and within the reach of Quirrel. Cursing his decision to come here once more Harry looked up at Quirrel’s impatient face and smiled weakly.

“Well boy?” Quirrel queried, his face curious. “What do you see?”

“I ... uh,” Harry stuttered and swallowed. “I see ...” You heart’s desire ... but what if I can’t think of anything I want? “I don’t see anything, sir. Just my ... my reflection.” I feel really smart right now ...’ Harry cursed himself.

“He lies.” The high thin voice spoke once more and Harry heard him this time and nearly swore. Quirrel struck him across the face and Harry fell to the floor, gasping and feeling fear grip him where he lay.

“Tell me the truth!” Quirrel roared.

Harry froze and said the first thing he could think of. “I saw myself a decorated auror standing before my father. Happy yet?” He snapped. Harry didn’t let his face show his surprise. He hadn’t thought of that before, but it had just come to him. Quirrel paused then and sneered at him.

“So, ashamed then.” Quirrel spat. “Useless. I don’t need you hanging around then, so ... goodbye.”

Harry felt his stomach plummet as light gathered in the tip of Quirrel’s wand, glowing brilliant green that strangely reminded him of his mother’s eyes. Watching with a horrified fascination, he started as

badly as Quirrel did when a shot rang through the room and the spell shot off into the roof, shattering the ceiling above. Something heated against his chest, Quirrel swore, and Harry blacked out.

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Alan could think of several things he'd much rather be doing at the moment than trying to save some uppity Gryffindor with too much courage for his own good, but he supposed the fact that it was Voldemort trying to kill said Gryffindor made everything better. Alan told his sarcasm to stuff itself and dodged just out of the range of the door as a spell shot through the fire once more, and considered that having something a little more deadly than a BB gun would probably come in handy.

"Accio child." Quirrel screamed. Alan's head smacked painfully into the wall behind him as the spell pulled him against it, and he cursed as he tried to think of how to counter the spell. However, Quirrel wasn't completely stupid and he twitched the spell over and pulled Alan through the doorway. The fire burned against his skin, but he was through the path soon enough and was tossed onto the floor just inside the door as Quirrel stalked up to him. Alan scrambled to his feet and looked worriedly around the room, searching for an exit, but, as expected, he found none. Harry was unconscious on the floor just across the room, pieces of stone scattered about him. Alan couldn't help but feel grateful both for his presence and his lack of consciousness. He may have been Slytherin, but being famous was not on Alan's list of desirable situations.

However, considering his present situation, he couldn't stop the reaction Quirrel had, as the man inhaled painfully, and the high thin voice from before returned.

"I know you ... Alan Prince, they say." The voice laughed, but Alan didn't feel like talking, and his gun discharged once more, aimed at Quirrel's head. The round was dodged, but Quirrel had walked right into the second and he yelped as the round imbedded itself into his turban.

"Talk off the hairball, Quirrel. You look stupid." Alan yelled. Reinforcements were coming, he was sure of it. He just had to buy time ... Alan dodged the spell that came his way after that, and rolled closer to Harry, feeling slightly panicky. He had pocketed the potion to go back, but the black fire was different from the purple fire and he knew those potion-spell combinations didn't like it if you mixed the wrong. In fact, he knew they tended to simply make the reactions worse if you combined them wrong. Thinking that, however, made for a promising possibility ...

"You can't hide forever, Prince." Quirrel shouted. "You can't even run in here. What is the point anyways, no one knows you're here, do they? I'll have the stone by the time anyone realizes you two brats are gone, and I'll be out of here myself."

Alan growled and then frowned when he found the fire had gone out once he left the room. There went the idea of trying to burn Quirrel to ash. But what about when Dumbledore came down ... Alan ran over and went straight to Harry, wondering if he should wake him or just wait over here. Alan looked up to try and find Quirrel and instead found his eyes locked on the mirror before him. He didn't even notice Quirrel coming closer as he stared at what he saw in the mirror.

His reflection looked almost exactly like himself, but he wasn't alone. Beside him in the mirror was another person, someone he couldn't see quite clearly, but that strongly reminded him of Potter. He was just standing there, with his hand on Alan's shoulder, completely relaxed and confident. He had his wand in hand, and, as Alan watched, his own reflection stood beside the other and pulled his own wand, standing completely comfortably next to the other. He didn't know why, but he knew, without a shadow of a doubt what the mirror meant. And, as he thought about a moment longer, he knew what the mirror showed.

"Got you." Quirrel growled. Alan screamed as Quirrel's hand descended onto his neck, holding him painfully tight and jerking him to his feet. His gun fell from his hand, and Alan looked back at Quirrel with a fierce glare moments before Quirrel dropped him with a strangled yelp. Alan landed on his feet, snatching up his gun and scurrying farther away, running his hand over his neck and feeling the

strange heat lingering there. Once more the high-pitched voice screamed,

“Get him, he has what we need! He cannot remain alive!”

Alan paled as Quirrel lifted his wand, and, in return, Alan’s gun came level with Quirrel’s face and his mind simply shut down. He pulled the trigger even as Quirrel spoke, and Alan dropped after the round left. Quirrel had time to finish his spell, and then collapsed as blood ran down his face from a ruined eye, even as footsteps came closer once more. Alan swallowed and tracked Dumbledore’s entrance with a closed expression, swallowing lightly as his hands fell to his sides. The only expression he wore was blank until he finally let himself fall to his knees.

This was just not his day.

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Alan woke up in the hospital wing. Staring at the ceiling, he worried his lip for several long moments before he glanced to the side of his bed and then back at the ceiling.

Yep.

The headmaster was still sitting calmly next to his bed, waiting for him to acknowledge him. He didn’t really want to talk, though, so he was gladly remaining silent and letting it continue. Finally, however, Dumbledore spoke.

“Good evening, Alan. It’s good to see you awake. You’ve been asleep two days.”

Alan merely nodded, not asking any questions and continuing his staring at the ceiling.

“I must wonder what you were doing in the forbidden corridor last night. Harry woke yesterday and answered that you had your own suspicions about Quirrel, similar to those of him and his friends. I

would like to hear where you came up with them. You appeared confident that Quirrel was a threat."

Alan ran through his mind his uncle's family tree as he tried to ignore the Headmaster. He half-wished he was back with his uncle, as he presently didn't want to have to answer the questions directed at him. Those would put him in a position he did not want to be in.

"Alan, please answer."

'No, thank you,' Alan thought at him, 'I have no desire at all to be tied up with you or anyone.'

"Alan, this isn't good behaviour. You killed someone, Alan, and that is something very serious. I need to know why."

Alan still didn't answer, and finally, Alan felt a tendril of magic push at his mind. Alan threw up the strongest barrier he could and solidified it against intrusion, hoping against hope that someone would show up and stop this mess. Dumbledore was apparently wary of a student who could block him out as Alan had, and was merely ghosting along the edge of Alan's shields at the moment, testing for any weakness. He continued to speak.

"Alan, this worries me. You are reticent and silent, withdrawn and honestly, you are the perfect Slytherin."

'No duh, sir, considering my heritage I would be,' Alan once again drawled mentally. He really did have a sarcastic inner voice.

"In this day and age, with our present climate, such an attitude will be dangerous for you. Having a weapon at school is even more cause for concern, and to have killed one of your teachers, no matter the circumstances, is disturbing even to me. I am concerned about you, and will be speaking to your guardians over the summer, but I would like to talk to you first if you will allow me."

Alan smiled at the thought of his uncle and Dumbledore going up against each other, and then winced as Dumbledore dived at his shields to attempt to make them shatter. They buckled, but held, and

Alan began to sweat slightly with the effort of maintaining them. Suddenly, and unbidden, the image of Dumbledore seeing his godfather nearly stole all his control and he gasped and sat up. Dumbledore's attempt skittered away at Alan's sudden movement and Alan glared at the headmaster, avoiding his eyes, and snarling wordlessly. Dumbledore was about to speak once more when the door to the infirmary was slammed open. Dumbledore looked out curiously as the powerful stride came over to the curtain surrounding Alan's bed and the cloth was thrown back as Professor Snape stepped in, fixing the Headmaster with a fierce glare.

"Dumbledore, I disapprove of you interrogating one of my students without me here." Snape glanced Alan's way and then continued. "Using Legilimency against a student is despicable as well, and I am tired of you manipulating him. Just because he is Slytherin does not give you a right to whatever methods you desire, and honestly, I would likely be more skilled than you in getting the answers you desire, partially because Alan trusts me. Something I don't believe you have."

Alan fought down a small smile as Snape cut down the Headmaster, and subtly glanced at the Headmaster. He was surprised to see a small, thoughtful frown on the Headmaster's face as he glanced at Alan and then back to Snape without any change in expression. Finally the Headmaster stood and took Snape out of the curtains, raising a basic Silencing barrier. Alan frowned again, and picked his wand up off the bedside table, and, using a small charm, opened a hole in the silencing ward in order to hear the conversation as it continued.

"- The use of a deadly weapon in the school." Dumbledore finished.

"I have questioned the boy about his pellet gun. It was given to him for self-defence, and he was advised in how to use it properly. In case you hadn't thought to check, which I did, the Killing curse was used in that room twice, Albus. Alan only ever aimed at his head twice that we can prove, once when the round was stuck in Quirrel's turban and once when he did shoot him. There were several other shots that only caused harm, and from what I have received from the boy's guardians, they have good reason to give the boy something for

his own defence. Both times he has used his gun has been in defence of his life, against an older, more experienced wizard, when his own knowledge of magic hindered him. And let me remind you, both times this happened, you should've been able to prevent the danger. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to manipulate the Potter boy for your own use and you're simply upset that it backfired upon an 'outsider'."

Alan raised his eyebrow and then smacked his own forehead. That was foolish of him; he remembered what he'd been told of his origins and now that he remembered them, it did make sense that it was Potter who was getting caught up as well. After all, from what he knew, it very well could have been Potter or even Longbottom that was in his position. A position he'd rather gladly have handed over to them if he'd had the choice.

"It doesn't change the fact that Alan's shot killed Professor Quirrel. What child should be able to kill so callously?"

"Stop lying, Headmaster. Alan's shot never killed Quirrel and you know it. It weakened him, and when the Dark Lord fled his body, the combined shock killed him. It's the Dark Lord's fault he's dead, not Alan's, so stop trying to pin this on the boy."

Dumbledore was silent for several long moments, and Alan frowned before he spoke again.

"You're not defending him as his Head of House, are you Severus?"

"Pardon?" Snape's tone was deathly cold, and Alan frowned. The Headmaster was really butting in on something that wasn't his business ...

"You've been very different since Alan arrived, Severus, more pleasant and distracted. Several of your older students have observed so, and I must wonder ... the boy has some distinguished looks."

Distinguished. Alan snorted and frowned. His looks were distinguished like Albus' beard.

“A passing resemblance, Albus, but I won’t deny a fondness for an intelligent student. He’s the greatest prodigy I’ve had in Potions for a long time, and he’s respectful and perceptive.”

“Severus, your mother’s maiden name was Prince. There was a woman in your life, I know, so please … tell me the truth.”

Severus was silent for several long moments, and Alan was trying to remember some of the choice words he remembered hearing his Uncle use when Severus finally answered.

“Yes, Albus.” He grated out. “Alan Prince is my son. His mother … apparently, his mother had taken pains to ensure he was cared for in the event of her death, and his godfather – who I do not know the identity of, so don’t ask – took him to her sister, who married an American. They took care of him till now, and sent him here as per her wishes.”

Alan frowned and began to fiddle with his sheet. He didn’t like that the Headmaster was manipulating his father, and he couldn’t imagine why he was pressing so hard. Did he really know about that prophecy? Perhaps he knew more than his uncle did, but what did that matter? Why was Albus being so controlling?

“Severus, what type of woman was Amber again?”

“Albus,” Alan heard the constrained fury in his father’s voice and gave the curtain a look of awe. The Headmaster really was stupid if he was pushing that hard. “What does this have to do with my son and why should I even answer? I believe the present issue is what occurred when your careful preparations failed to protect the stone, and not the history of my child and other relationships. I thought it was you who said the past is the past.”

“Very well Severus, then I leave asking him to you. I would like to know what he was doing there and –“

“I think I can figure out the important information for myself, thank you. If you find something lacking please feel free to point it out.”

The Headmaster left after Severus' acerbic dismissal, and although his steps were hesitant, he did leave. Once he was gone, Severus dispelled the silencing barrier and brushed past the curtain. Finding Alan sitting there with a slightly sour expression, he sighed and took the seat next to the bed.

"You heard." He observed. Alan nodded shortly. "I apologize. I do not believe he will share the information, and I'm sorry he had to find out that way."

"It's okay, dad." Alan returned. Severus looked at him curiously and Alan just smiled. "He was pushing a lot, wasn't he? Were his questions about the Dark Lord?"

Severus nodded shortly, and Alan turned to fiddle with his bedspread.

"Why were you at the corridor, Alan?" Severus asked.

Alan rubbed his hair back and frowned. "Potter and the others were concerned. Potter had observed that Quirrel was complaining of a stomachache, and he made the same connection I did with my pellet gun and the creature in the forest. He apparently came to the conclusion Quirrel had something to do with the Dark Lord himself from another source, but I ... I felt him, then. Out in the forest." Alan's hand hovered near his face once more and Severus placed a firming hand on his shoulder. Alan smiled faintly at him and continued. "The only place that might have something hidden was the third floor corridor. I waited it out, then, and when the three of them went in, I tailed them. I followed them down, and we made it to the end, and I let Potter go first." Alan shrugged. "He distracted Quirrel, nearly got killed, I interfered and got dragged in. I'd known it was him from when I'd first seen him through there anyways." Again, his hand touched his face and Severus frowned. Alan didn't notice, caught up in remembering. "He couldn't touch me; it burned him for some reason, and then ..." Alan shrugged. "I needed him off me. I needed him stopped."

Severus nodded faintly, and kept his hand affectionately on Alan's shoulder, even as Alan leaned into the touch. "I'm proud of you,

Alan." He managed. Alan smiled faintly and shrugged, remaining silent for several more minutes before he spoke again.

"What was that mirror down there? The one Quirrel couldn't figure out."

"Albus told me it was the Mirror of Erised."

"What's it do?"

Severus was silent for several moments. "I've heard it reflects the deepest desire of a person's heart. He'd manipulated the enchantment to protect the stone in some way at the time, but ... did you see it at some point?"

Alan nodded. "After Harry had gotten the stone out of it. My reflection ... there was someone beside me, someone my age. I think ..." Alan faltered, not sure he wanted to keep speaking.

"You don't have to tell me. I don't think I'd ever tell anyone what I might see in that mirror." Severus intoned.

Alan laughed faintly. "You'd see yourself with you bare left arm, mother on one hand and me on the other, wouldn't you? Or something like that."

"Something like that, I'm sure." Severus smiled.

Alan leaned up against him and sighed happily. He didn't think he'd tell Severus what he'd seen in that mirror quite yet. He wasn't sure he liked the thought himself. The one thing he wanted, his desire for an equal, someone who could match him in every way ... the thing was, only one person could ever meet him, and he hadn't needed the mirror for that. The only student in the school who had raw power like his, something he hadn't needed the Sorting Hat to know or even the likeness in the mirror, was one Harry Potter, the son of James Potter, his father's rival. The boy who should have been a Slytherin, who he had known didn't like him from the beginning of school, and someone he doubted he'd ever become friend's with, recent actions aside.

To quote his godfather and shock his aunt: "Life's a sick and twisted bitch."

"Prince?"

The voice broke the two of them apart, and Severus was sitting an appropriate distance away for a concerned head of house when McGonagall came in to stand awkwardly near Alan's bed. She looked uncomfortable, and tight-lipped, but she firmly stood her ground and finally she managed to speak.

"I heard about what happened from Potter." She acknowledged. "And I will say, I am impressed and awed by your actions. Twenty-five points to Slytherin," She admitted. Alan felt his jaw drop, and his father looked in no better condition, "For displaying uncharacteristic nerve in the face of danger."

She abruptly left with that gift, and Alan watched her go wide-eyed. "Has she ever given that many points to another house?" He asked, dazed.

Severus shook himself loose from his contemplation and then swallowed. "No, never. I suppose, I can now say, twenty-five points for accomplishing the impossible. Making McGonagall put Slytherin above her own house by positive points."

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Harry sat with Neville, Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table for the end of the year. They were all disappointed with the outcome they'd had – Ravenclaw has scraped by a win even with Harry making it to the game. He'd still been mildly disoriented, and had caught the snitch too early, when the game was still young. The points he'd acquired hadn't been enough to make up for Snape's vindictiveness and Harry and Neville's blunder of being out far too late. Ravenclaw had managed to maintain their lead, and thus the Great Hall was decked out in the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw. The high point was that Slytherin had finally been defeated, but it would have been nice to win.

Dumbledore finally entered the room, making his way to the dais and smiling genially at the children gathered around. Once he was in the place of honour he looked out over them all and gave a warm welcome.

“Another year gone! Allow me to trouble you with an old man’s words before we settle down to the feast before us. It has been a wonderful year and I hope you have all packed your heads full this year ... you have all summer to empty them once more ... Now, it is time for the house cup to be awarded. As things stand, in fourth place is Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points. Third place is Gryffindor, with four hundred and two points, Slytherin with four hundred and twenty-seven points and Ravenclaw boasts four hundred and thirty points.”

The Ravenclaw table exploded with cheers, and Harry grinned as he saw, through the standing, milling party at Ravenclaw, several glares sent up the Slytherin table to Prince and Malfoy. Malfoy was sitting with his head ducked between his twin bodyguards of Crabbe and Goyle, while Prince was acting as though he was sitting alone save for his few comments to Zabini seated beside him.

“Yes, I am glad to see you all glowing in your achievement.” Dumbledore continued, “However, there are recent events to consider that deserve proper recognition, and thus I have several points to award.”

“First, to Mr. Ronald Weasley.”

Harry laughed at the caught expression that crossed Ron’s face.

“For the best played game of chess seen by Hogwarts in many years, I award Gryffindor house twenty points.”

The whole house cheered happily for the motion. Harry saw Dumbledore send an apologetic glance to Ravenclaw house, who were all fussing at the loss of their points, however since the rumour mill had been running in the few days since Harry and his had gone into the bowels of the school, the points were considered well-earned and they certainly weren’t excessive.

"Second," Dumbledore continued, "To Miss Hermione Granger. For the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house twenty points."

Hermione looked ready to faint, but Harry was laughing wildly at the acknowledgement, and the movement into the winning place. Neville was snickering, until Dumbledore said his name next.

"Third to Mr. Neville Longbottom, for diligence in protecting one's friends, I award fifteen points."

It was Ron and Hermione's turns to laugh at Neville's pink face, and Harry once more slapped him on the back, to which Neville elbowed him in turn.

"Next, to Mr. Alan Prince," The hall fell silent at the sudden change in pace. Most of them were unaware of Prince's involvement that night, and were wondering where his name had come from. "For silent determination accomplish a goal, I award Slytherin thirty points."

Both Gryffindor and Slytherin exploded, angry students everywhere. They were now at a tie for the house cup, something neither house could stand for. Even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were angry, as neither could see why Prince had gotten points. Harry was wondering what the Headmaster was doing, even as Ron and Hermione added their own indignation, with Neville remaining confused and silent. Finally, Dumbledore managed to calm the Great Hall, and all of them sat down to the words, "The points are unfinished."

"Finally, to Mr. Harry Potter," Harry squirmed as he felt more than the weight of Dumbledore's gaze fall on him, almost an unprecedented expectation that he only wished would go away. "For outstanding courage, and pure nerve, I award Gryffindor house twenty-five points."

The Hall exploded in cheers from the House of the Lion.

Harry, exuberant at the unexpected win, still felt a dark weight in the corner of his mind that something just wasn't right. However, with Dean Thomas pounding him on the back, and his friends smiling fit to burst around him, Harry was willing to put off his wondering for some other day.

Okay. Be happy. The end of first year. Now, second year is also complete and so will be posted under this same story as chapter six after another two week interval, with the same patterns. Reviews are appreciated and may be the difference in acquired a fourth year or not. raised eyebrow So please,

Read and Review. offers cookie

Fire and Napalm

Second Year:

Chapter Six

Alan Prince lay lengthwise on a dark armchair in a small sittingroom lined with many books. On his chest lay a folded letter face down, and he was absently chewing on the back end of his quill as he stared upside down at the fireplace opposite him. Alan was presently at Severus Snape's home at Spinner's End, a dingy house, slightly rundown, but in better condition than it had been for a long time. Alan was happy to be there with his father, but he did miss the numerous children who would run about everywhere at his Uncle's family mansion. However, for this summer, he was certainly willing to spend the time with his father, who was likely ensconced in the Potion's lab upstairs again.

Alan Prince was eleven years old, still a month away from his twelfth birthday, and a small, dark-haired boy with a distinguished face. His nose was reminiscent of his father's, his eyes were dark, and his hair was kept short and out of the way. It wasn't greasy, but the shine it had was indicative of at least a similar tendency. Alan had grown up with his uncle in America, which gave him an accent that Severus had commented on disdainfully several times. But Severus was a wary father, and he tried hard to make the best of the time he now had with the son he'd never known. However, presently, he had other requirements on his time, and Alan was spending his time contemplating the best way to get his Uncle to come over and visit, and maybe get Severus to do something a little more 'fun'.

Alan's awkward contemplations, however, shattered as someone knocked on the front door. He glanced that way, but Severus shouted down the stairs.

"Alan, stay put. I'm coming, I'm coming."

Alan didn't move. Severus had warned him to not answer the door, and several times, he had been asked to leave for his room. Of course, the passages that ran through the house made eavesdropping simple and almost expected, and Alan knew who each of those guests had been. It was a matter of importance that he

know who his father didn't want to see him, and the names he'd gathered had been recorded in a locked and cursed diary. Lucius Malfoy, and the older Crabbe and Goyle. Parkinson. Rookwood. All of them men Alan knew from his uncle's books as suspected Death Eaters, none of whom had been imprisoned. All of who were rich.

The knocking returned, and then the door was pulled open.

"Ah, Severus. How wonderful to see you."

"Albus." Severus returned. Alan could hear his father's stress. Quickly, Alan stood and moved off the chair and back behind the sofa across the room. He curled up casually, as though he were reading his letter, and pulled out a second piece of parchment and a small ink pot, his ears trained upon the men talking in the front hall.

"You've done marvels with this house, Severus. I haven't seen it this clean in years."

"What do you want, Albus?" Severus grated out.

"Must I always have a reason for visiting a good friend?" Albus sounded genuinely curious and Alan curled his lip. "Will you be inviting me in, then?" His tone had changed to something more business-like.

"Fine." Severus growled. "The sitting room is here."

Alan heard the door to the front close as the one to the sitting room, where he lay crouched, opened.

"This is lovely indeed." Albus blustered, and suddenly the candles in the lamp above flared, bringing several times more light into the room than before. Alan could hear several grumbles coming from his father before someone stiffly seated himself on the sofa Alan was behind. A glance up showed lank dark hair, and Alan smiled slightly, turning back to playing with his quill as he listened in on the conversation.

"What do you want, Albus? This is not a social visit, I can tell."

"Is Alan about anywhere?" Albus returned, his voice curious.

"He's somewhere about. Possibly out in the village, possibly curled in his room with a book. I was working on my potions, and he tends to busy himself elsewhere when I haven't requested his help. He is only a child, still." His tone, which tried to sound dismissive, couldn't hide the slight warmth that coloured the words. Alan could also easily imagine the dismissive gesture he would have made, alongside the small glitter in his eyes that reminded Alan of a soft laugh.

"You care for him, then." Albus observed. Alan felt cold at the clinical sound of the words, and he quickly uncapped his inkpot and dipped the quill, scratching an introduction onto the blank parchment he had. If Albus was here for what Alan suspected, he really would need to send a letter. "Severus, are you sure you are in a position to care for a child?"

"Albus, why are you bringing this up? There is no present danger, and I don't feel this matter is anything you should be troubling yourself with. Am I not allowed to care for a child, then? You do not control me outside of your school, Albus, I am no longer your spy." Severus spat. "I feel I've earned at least some choices of my own. The danger is past."

"We have no proof Voldemort was vanquished, Severus, and in Quirrel you know he tried to return to power. I would be mistaken if I said that I did not believe Voldemort knew who Alan was. Having him here, without protection makes him a target. I do not want your child to be in danger, Severus." Albus returned earnestly.

Severus was silent for several long moments before he answered. "I think I know already the dangers of having a child, Albus, and I appreciate your offer of protecting him. I have kept him out of sight, though, and he is a smart child, able to keep himself locked away when he needs to be. This house has many corners to protect him, and were something to happen to me, he does still have his uncle to return to, and methods to get there." Alan had shown Severus the emergency portkey his uncle had insisted he wear, easily activated, though he hadn't told Severus how.

"Severus," Albus sighed, "do you really want to trust a man you do not know with your son?"

"He's done a fine job raising him before now, Albus, and we have communicated through the school year. I feel perfectly confident trusting him with Alan's safety. I don't feel the same confidence with you, Albus, as I don't want to fear you will use him as leverage against me were my 'unique position' required once more."

Albus gave a deep sigh, and Alan furiously continued to scribble down his note. "Severus, this is also what concerns me. A child will endanger your position as a spy, and he may very well be demanded as a promise of your loyalty."

"No one other than you, sir, and Alan's uncle know that Alan is my son. Only you, I, and the boy's uncle even know he is here."

Alan could hear Albus' frown. "Indeed, this uncle of his concerns me as well. I do not know the man, and I'm not sure I can trust him with all that you seem to be entrusting him with."

"Albus, you must be slipping." Severus teased. Alan smiled brightly, finishing off the note. "Something you don't know? I'm astonished."

"Severus, this isn't something to make light of."

"Considering how much you're trying to control me, Albus, I think I'm allowed to make light of anything I want. This is my house."

"And the matter is the safety of your son. Do you really want to play games with his life?"

Alan had had enough of them bantering back and forth as though his opinion was nonexistent. This was something that definitely wouldn't have happened at his uncle's without someone having made sure no child was in the room, and Alan stood quickly behind his father and leaned over his shoulder to smile at him, holding the letter he'd written loosely in hand.

"Hey Dad."

Albus choked slightly and Severus jerked back and blinked. Honestly, did he think Alan would just not listen to this conversation when he'd listened to every other conversation Severus had had supposedly without his knowledge?

"Can I borrow your owl to send this letter or do you need me to acquire another post owl? It's for my uncle."

Severus paused for a moment, and then rubbed his eyes. "I observe you were listening in, Alan. And I suppose we could even floo it to him after Albus leaves if you would like. It's for your uncle?"

"Mhmm," Alan nodded happily. "My uncle Geoffrey." Alan gave Albus a short look from the corner of his eyes. "Geoffrey Alfaerus."

Albus blanked his face before he could show any expression, but Alan had seen the reaction several times. The Alfaerus, although not well known this side of the ocean, were a large, influential family in America. That Alan's uncle was a member of the family made using him as leverage highly unwise. Alan just grinned as he leaned over the couch, and Severus finally blinked out of his surprise and shook his head.

"Why don't you just ... go up to my room and floo it over, alright? I need to finish up in here."

Alan pouted, but dropped down, picked up his letter and inkpot, and strode out of the room in as stately a manner as he could manage.

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Harry hurtled towards the ground on his Nimbus Two Thousand, laughing as he evaded Neville's wild dart towards him once more. Neville pulled himself up and tried again, but Harry levelled off with the ground and shot forward, back towards the large Longbottom Manor on the hill before them. It was their game of tag and Harry loved it: he was unbeatable, had been even before he had his own Nimbus. Between him, Neville and Ron, Harry had always been the natural on a broomstick, just like his father.

However, as Harry flew along the pathway, he had to pull into a barrel roll to get off the path and not bowl Albus Dumbledore over as he apparated onto the walkway to the front door. Harry quickly jerked his broom to a stop and dropped to the ground before him, smiling widely even through his concern. Flying always made him smile.

"Headmaster Dumbledore, we weren't expecting you here – Look out!" Harry shouted, ducking down. Dumbledore copied him and Neville hurtled over their heads, trying to engage his brakes still. He came to a stop twenty feet beyond and looked back over with a pale face. "Neville!" Harry shouted. "I thought you knew how to stop!"

"I do, Harry, but ... I'm so sorry, Professor Dumbledore, really, I am. Are you alright? Do you want to talk to our parents; they should be up at the manor still. I really didn't mean to almost hit you, sir."

"It is fine, children. Yes, I am here to see your parents, however, from the looks of things they're already coming this way."

Harry and Neville both looked up to see their parents running down the pathway towards them. Harry raised his hand and eagerly waved up at them, while Neville did so a little more timidly. Chances are, they'd seen his amazing blunder and he wasn't too eager to hear any more comments on his rather amazing lack of control.

James arrived first, and smiled brightly at his son before turning to shake Dumbledore's hand. "Good to see you, Albus. Better to see you're alright; that was some crazy flying the two of them were up to. To what do you owe this wonderful visit, hm?" James ducked his head as Lily swatted him on the shoulder, but he just smiled cheekily at her and she exchanged her own pleasant greeting with Albus in turn, along with Frank and Alice, who came up behind them, ruffling Neville's hair as they passed.

"To all of you, I am here just to check up with some good old friends. After my short visit with Severus, I felt catching up with a few others would be just as well."

James curled his lip at the mention of Severus, and then laughed and agreed. Albus was led inside, and once more Harry took off on his broom, Neville trailing behind. It wasn't until fifteen minutes later that Harry found the owl coming in with a brilliant red letter. Neville was beside him in a rare moment, and Harry pointed it out.

"Who do you think the letter's for?" Harry asked.

"Dunno, I don't think my parents have gotten anyone angry with them in a long while."

"Mine neither. Maybe ..." Harry looked over at Neville and both grinned widely and flew down to the front door, dropping their brooms beside it and racing up to the sitting room where their parents were talking happily with Dumbledore. They arrived just in time.

"Such a year again." James finished. "Hey, don't owls usually pick better times to show up? Oh dear, Lily ... have you made anyone angry recently?"

"Certainly not, James. What – oh my. Well, someone needs to let the letter in. Let's see who receives it ..."

There was silence, and then a strained chuckle.

"Oh dear." Albus returned. "This doesn't appear good."

"Might as well open it, Albus." Frank returned. "I don't think we could get far enough away to give you much in the way of privacy. We'll keep it quiet, promise."

Harry gave Neville a tight look, and Neville just shrugged. Suddenly, a man's irritated but controlled voice filled the room.

"Mr. Dumbledore, I don't believe my ears or eyes from the letter I just received. I never pegged you as a manipulative cur, but I appear to have been wrong. After all, since my nephew just wrote me, you were trying to use him as leverage against his father. What is it with you and trying to control Severus?"

The voice, amplified but not yet sounding too angry, changed suddenly to a woman's strident tone.

"Mr. Dumbledore, I myself have my own views that you really should keep your nose out of our business, and out of Severus'. Someone's child is their own concern, and since you have already agreed that immoral Mouldy-shorts is dead I think it's high time you let a few select people," Her tone was sarcastic, and they all heard a cough in the background that sounded like 'Severus' "live their own lives. If I hear one more time that you're trying to use my sister's son as leverage, you're history!"

"You'll have threatening letters every four days!" The man shouted.
"And don't think we won't go through with them!"

"Ads in the Daily Prophet; the real person who charmed those goats, and why!" A second, male stranger threw in.

"No American funds to your school!" The man continued, followed by the woman,

"Salem will never recommend Hogwarts again!"

"We'll pull the boy and send him to Salem or Durmstrang!"

"And trust me, Severus will never be named a Death Eater again; he has the backing of the Alfaerus family as an upstanding citizen, and solid evidence he worked as a spy. More evidence than even you have, Dumbledore." The woman finished. "So hear this out," The man joined in as they both shouted, "Mind your own fucking business and leave Severus Snape alone!"

The Howler shrivelled and collapsed as ash. Harry looked at Neville once more and swallowed. Harry quickly directed Neville to follow him and they left the hallway, Neville pulling Harry with him to his bedroom. When they were in there, Harry fell onto the bed and glared at the ceiling, his head swarming with questions. Neville spoke first.

"I never thought I'd hear someone defending Professor Snape."

"I never thought I'd hear someone accuse Dumbledore of something so ... so ... callous." Harry returned. He sat up and fixed Neville with a confused look. "They said Dumbledore was trying to use their nephew against Snape. As leverage. That means he's trying to get him to do something, and is threatening his kid in some way if he doesn't."

"That doesn't sound like Dumbledore." Neville returned. "Maybe they were wrong. Maybe the kid overheard and misread what he was hearing."

"If he was wrong, would his aunt and uncle have sent a howler to Dumbledore? They sounded pretty serious."

Neville shrugged. "Maybe they overreacted."

"And if they didn't?" Harry asked, his voice low. Neville looked back up at Harry to see his friend wearing a strangely fierce expression. "I don't want to be used, Neville."

Neville met his eyes for several long moments, and then nodded carefully, in complete agreement with Harry's words. He didn't want to be used either. After a few minutes of commiseration, Neville leaned back in his armchair and put his hands behind his head. "Somehow I don't think your dad would be easily intimidated."

Harry snorted. "No, I don't think so either. He's a little too forward, almost. He wouldn't be cowed by anything."

Neville snorted. "Nah, and my dad neither. If one won't be intimidated, the other won't either. Besides, James is my godfather."

"And so you're my brother." Harry drawled. Silence stretched for several long moments, and then Harry sat up and gave Neville a small smile. "And I'm glad."

Neville met his smile for a short few moments, and then looked away, slightly pink. "Does this mean you're going to play keep away again?"

Harry's grin sounded in his voice. "Nah, lets go practice throwing gnomes."

Neville groaned as Harry jumped off the bed and walked out into the hall, following slowly behind. "But Harry ... I don't want to throw gnomes. You always throw them to heck and gone and I don't stand a chance. How about chess, we could play chess ...Gobstones? Anything else?"

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Diagon Alley was very busy in the summer, after students got their Hogwarts letters. Harry knew his parents weren't entirely fond of the crowds, but he himself found them fascinating. However, even he could see that the massive crowd inside Flourish and Blotts was abnormal. The only thing he could see as being the cause was a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

Gilderoy Lockhart

Will be signing copies of his autobiography,

Magical Me

Today 12:30 – 4:30 pm

Apparently his parents saw it as well.

"Oh god, James." Sirius drawled. "Do we have to go in there? I think his hair spray is making my nose itch all the way out here!"

"Sirius, be reasonable." Lily snapped. "That's all the perfume the women have slopped on to try and get his attention. Honestly."

All three of them wore expressions of distaste, and Harry could only laugh as he remembered the last time his parents had run across Lockhart. They had all been at a press release about the aurors and Sirius and James had taken to laughing at the get-up Gilderoy was dressed in. Lily had tried to respect him at first, but after failing to avoid ten pranks in a row, their respect went completely bottoms up.

Now, they each took a glance at the crowded bookstore and Harry offered his own suggestion,

"We could come back later."

James shook his head. "No kiddo, we won't have time. There's more stuff going on in the auror business, and I don't want Lily taking you all out by herself." He ignored the token hit Lily gave him for talking like she was helpless again, and squared his shoulders as he pressed his way inside, Sirius beside him as Lily followed in their wake, her hand resting gently on Harry's shoulder.

"Can't believe we've got to get all the bloody books, James. Isn't that a little bit of extortion?"

"Sirius," James muttered. "You've got three guesses why they got assigned. There's rumour the job is cursed, already. Lockhart's so much of an airhead he wouldn't think much of that curse to begin with. I still stand by my part of the bet that says that he lied in all of the books."

Harry snickered. Most likely, he wasn't meant to hear all of that, but he didn't really care, nor did he mind. He found their attitude amusing. As they'd wandered through the store, they came upon the crowd that had settled around Gilderoy Lockhart, and could hear the questions now being sent his way.

"Sir, I see that the students have all been snatching up your books. Someone told me they're all on the list for the students to buy this year. Do you know who it is that has assigned your works?"

Harry saw him flash a warm smile around the crowd, and upon seeing Harry his eyes lit up. Harry tried to move back, but ran into Lily moments before Gilderoy pulled him through the crowd. He was pressed against him before he knew what was happening, and Gilderoy responded.

"Well, since I find teaching so important, and am so excellent a duellist myself I decided to take on the job as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, to show kids like young Mr. Potter here how to

fight for themselves! Isn't that right, Harry? You're going to be one of my ace students, aren't you? You've already got the history."

The flashing lights blinded Harry and he quickly shook his head, pulling to try and get away. He didn't answer, and when he could see he found Lockhart's smile become a trifle forced. He didn't have to wait long, though, as a rumbling growl Harry knew very well started behind him.

"Let go of my son, Gilderoy. I think my opinion of you is plain." James hissed. Several more lights went off, and Gilderoy released Harry at once, into Lily's waiting arms. One of the reporters took the bait immediately and shot a question at them.

"Mr. Potter, you are a well respected auror. What is your opinion of Gilderoy and his accomplishments?"

James growled again, and then answered in a clear voice. "I think Gilderoy must have either fabricated his stories or stolen them from someone else, as he has yet to prove to know anything about defence to me. I certainly am not most pleased to have him teaching my son and godson. Now, excuse me. I have actual business to be taking care of." He levelled a glare at the excessive fanfare surrounding Lockhart and then directing Harry to the till to pay for the books, his face a dark glower. Lily was hissing in his ear about being polite in public and not making a scene, but her words fell on deaf ears and Harry himself frowned. His father wasn't really the most tactful person, but then again, his dad was a true Gryffindor. The thought made him frown, and suddenly Sirius pressed his hand onto Harry's hair and messed it up.

"Cheer up, Harry. You can always make his life miserable once you're in school with him. If nothing else, you can direct the Weasley twins his way and let them take care of him. They'll do a good job, I'm sure, and you can always pitch in to help. You've got a mean eye for trouble, you know."

"I know, Padfoot." Harry returned, ducking away to save his hair. "But really, I think I'll leave that to the experts" Sirius laughed again, and then sent him on his way as James stormed out of the store, people

skittering out of their way. They stepped out into the sunshine, and James was once again muttering under his breath. Lily sighed deeply and glared idly his direction before gently ushering Harry towards the Leaky Cauldron. Harry went along, glancing around the streets. They were just past Madam Malkin's when James stopped muttering and spoke up once more.

"What's going on up there?"

Harry looked where he was pointing and blinked. There were two men standing in the alley, glaring at each other, and just to the side was a slight, dark-haired boy Harry thought looked like Prince. He was certainly holding himself in the way Prince usually did. The man with his back to them was slightly scruffy looking and confrontational, but the man he was facing was distinctly Lucius Malfoy. James stalked towards them, and Lily and Sirius followed, Harry trailing them carefully. As he came closer, the words cleared, and Harry could tell the scruffy man had the same accent Prince bore; one he thought was American. However, they quickly stopped as James came upon them.

"What's going on here?" He repeated, looking between the two arguing men, and pulling himself straight. He wasn't in his auror robes, but his bearing made it clear he had authority. Lucius also recognized him, and sneered.

"Just a discussion, Potter. No need for interference." Lucius drawled.

"Discussion my ass." Prince and the scruffy man both muttered together. Prince was tucked next to his side, and they clearly knew each other. The scruffy man smiled brightly as Harry's father turned to him, and gave a short bow that seemed both respectful and mocking. "No need to interference, indeed, sir, but not unwelcome. I'm just taking my nephew for a stroll, and we'll continue as is. No more arguments for us, and good day." The man turned without a word and left. James and Sirius both watched him leave, and as he did so, Lucius slipped off as well. Harry wondered what he was doing in the alley without taking Draco for his things, but just brushed it off, and followed as James began cursing under his breath again, leading them back to their home. When they arrived, there was a dilapidated

owl waiting in a clump of feathers on the table. Lily covered a snicker as she gently lifted the creature and removed the note.

"It's from the Weasleys. They'd like to come over, and we just need to floo them when we're back. James ..." Lily turned to look for him, but James had left the room. Harry knew he was heading off upstairs, dragging Sirius along to blow off some steam by practicing duelling. Lily's mouth twitched into a smile, and she looked down at Harry. "Well then. Do you want me to floo Neville as well, so you and him can both hang out with Ron?"

"Yeah, mom, please?" Harry brightened. Hanging out with Ron and Neville was grand fun. "Oh, and when I have a moment, I need to owl Hermione. She responded a few days ago."

"Harry, Hedwig is your owl, you know." Lily responded, as she looked over her shoulder at him from by the fireplace. "You don't have to ask before sending her out."

Harry flushed lightly, and Lily tossed the powder into the fireplace as she kneeled before it, and called the Longbottoms' address. Several minutes later, she pulled her head out, and Neville followed her retreat. He stumbled as he came out, and then darted over to Harry.

"Harry! You got your stuff, I presume?" Harry gave him a look that clearly asked, 'do you think I'm stupid?' Neville grinned and danced around him again. "I can't believe Lockhart took over the bookstore like that. He's such a loony!"

"It's worse, Neville." Harry returned. Neville blanched.

"How can it be worse than having him both in the Alley while we were getting our stuff, and having to buy all his books?"

"Being stuck with the idiot for a teacher."

Neville gaped silently at him for several long moments. Harry heard Frank's indignant spluttering to Lily telling him the same thing, and then the second roar of the floo as Lily contacted the Weasleys. Neville hung his head and faked a whimper.

"It's alright." Harry patted his back. "I got to see my dad and Sirius growl at him when he tried to use me as a publicity stunt. It was really funny, mostly because I seriously thought Padfoot would bite him if given the chance."

Neville barked out a laugh. "Sirius would bite someone, wouldn't he?"

They both laughed, and heard Molly greeting Lily as she came through the fire. Shortly thereafter, Ron came through as well and once he found Harry and Neville he ran over with a grin. Harry skittered out of reach when he tried to tackle him once more, and Ron pouted. Neville laughed again, taking on his announcer voice.

"Tackling Champion has now been foiled by favourite victim. How do you feel about this astounding loss?"

"Unsurprised, Neville." Ron grumped. "He had to catch on eventually. He's a Slythindor."

Harry leapt forward and planted his hand flat over Ron's mouth. "Ixnay on the house, Ron." Harry hissed. "No speaking of it." A jerk of his head indicated Lily talking to the Weasleys and Longbottoms behind them.

Ron looked confused and Harry removed his hand before ushering them both outside to the broom shed. Once the adults were left behind, Ron asked,

"Why are you so quiet about that, Harry? You'd think your mom would find it funny."

"Mom would, probably." Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "However, dad wouldn't. I just don't even want to run it by him." Neville nodded in understanding, but Ron was still confused. However, Neville looked between Harry's tight expression, and Ron who seemed ready to continue asking, and quickly slapped Ron's shoulder.

"Tag start, Ron's 'it'!"

Harry laughed immediately and raced to the broom shed, pulling out his Nimbus as Ron floundered.

"Hey wait a minute, we're not in the air yet!"

"You're still 'it'!" Harry called. "Catch us if you can! I'd advise cornering Neville; he still can't stop!"

"Harry!" Neville yelled. "You're not supposed to give me up!" He swung himself onto his own new comet, and tossed the spare comet to Ron as he joined Harry in the air. "If I end up 'it', I'm conspiring to catch you!"

"It'll take you both to get me anyways!" Harry returned. Ron joined them in the air shortly, and they both scattered. Ron went after Neville, and, true to Harry's word, managed to catch him out on a turn. However, Neville himself kept his word, and he and Ron began to work on cornering Harry, which was a task and a half with his high quality broom and hairpin control. They stopped after Neville thumped into one of the mansion walls, and Alice yelled at them to stop being insane and play nice. Landing finally on the roof, Harry rolled over and turned to Ron.

"Did you guys have the 'honour' of meeting Lockhart today, too?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Don't bring it up! Mom is still barmy about him, and I can't figure why. The only good thing about the day was when dad got in a brawl with Lucius at the entrance to the store."

Harry growled. "Was he getting all uppity about money again?" Ron nodded and Harry growled deeply once more. "I hope he got a bruise to remember the indignity by. He was being snarky to Prince later on, too. Prince and his guardian, I think. Didn't recognize the guy, but he's got the same weird accent Prince does but they look nothing alike."

Ron propped his head up. "Percy says Prince sounds American, but he also thinks he recognizes the family name."

"It could just be another branch that moved off." Neville added. "Lots of purebloods sent family to the Americas when the colonies developed. Squibs, weaklings, werewolves, family members in disgrace. Others ran over there for the same reason without being sent."

Ron deflated. "I suppose. You said he was being snarky to Prince? He was picking on Ginny at the bookstore. Mocking her books, and their quality. Said we only got them that nice through charity." Ron gave Harry and Neville a sidelong look, but both shrugged with a determinedly casual air. They both knew why the Weasleys had a bit more money than before. The minister hadn't had much choice but to give Arthur a raise when four of his finest aurors threatened resignation if he didn't, and he didn't keep quiet about it. They knew Arthur would suspect their involvement, but all of them turned a deaf ear when it was mentioned. Harry found it fun to practice that himself.

Ron shrugged then, and let it drop. Harry sighed, watching the clouds scud quickly across the sky. Neville daydreamed for a moment, and then grinned.

"So, Harry. How much are your parents willing to give you to prank Lockhart?"

Harry groaned as the other two boys perked at the thought. Honestly, what was it with Gryffindors and pranks?

A/N:: Thank you to everyone that has reviewed so far! I'll just reassure you all that unless I lose access to a computer, I will be putting up a chapter every two weeks; so far I have twenty complete, and being betaed. So don't worry about losing the story. The pace is allowing me to write at my comfort.

Please Read and Review!

Fire and Napalm

Chapter Seven

September first came with as little fanfare as it always had, and Harry was shortly ensconced on the train after another tearful goodbye from Nanna. She still insisted she was going to wither away without her brother with her, and no amount of hugs or reassurances seemed capable of convincing her otherwise. Harry wasn't sure whether to look forward to having her at Hogwarts, or to start worrying about it himself. He might never get a moment's peace! He was starting to wonder if he really should have just let the hat put him in Slytherin and be done with it. But no, that wouldn't have been good either...

A sock smacked into his face, and Harry turned back to find Neville looking at him with a wry smile, offering up a pack of Exploding Snap cards. "Care to stop thinking and get your backside thrashed, Mr. Potter?"

Harry grinned back. "I believe it is you who should be afraid for your rear, Mr. Longbottom."

The compartment door slammed open then, and a red-faced Ron looked inside with a tad fearful face. "Er, guys ... my sister doesn't have anywhere to sit. Can we, er, she come and join us? Just for right now, on the train. I looked, all the other compartments are full and, well ..." His face was something Harry knew well enough. He didn't want his sister to be sitting alone with strangers. He could appreciate the thought.

"Sure thing, Ron." Harry piped up. "Nice to have you here Ginny. Want to play Exploding Snap?"

Ginny nodded shortly, looking between Harry and Neville with slightly wide eyes. She was remaining very quiet, and only hesitantly joined in. Harry thought that really very odd, as she had never been this quiet before in their presence. However, it was Neville who gently indicated Harry should look over at her where she was sitting next to him. A short, sidelong glance as all he risked, and when he caught Ginny staring at him in turn, she squeaked, and scooted farther away on the bench. A question was half ready before he flushed himself

and mentally used several words that would have gotten his and his godfather's mouths washed out.

Ginny apparently was suffering from a crush. Small wonder she was now quiet around him. He just hoped it would go away sometime before he really got tired of it. He much preferred the spitfire Ron had introduced him to a few years ago. He'd really been impressed when she'd gotten Padfoot with a simple prank that only needed the application of oil ... to the floor and doorknob of the bathroom.

Ginny squeaked again and the hand blew. Yes, he really hoped she got over this fast.

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Harry was glad he wasn't going to have to suffer through Defence Against the Poncy Git until later that day. He hurried through breakfast, eager to get away from anything that might remind him of the man, and Neville and Ron really didn't argue with him. Hermione, however, was refusing to talk to him. It wasn't his fault though! She'd asked if his parents had ever met Lockhart, and he'd taken one look at the glassy expression she was wearing and pinched her. He got walloped with her book for it, and for some reason, his reasoning of trying to cure her of an unhealthy interest just didn't go over well. He was highly disappointed such an intelligent girl was falling for such a ridiculous fraud, but he supposed she'd figure it out in time. He could only hope.

Herbology was first, and Harry joined the others waiting near the greenhouses. They were heading into class, which was to be in Greenhouse Three, when Harry felt someone grab the back of his robes, halting him. Professor Sprout glanced back out and frowned, but whoever had grabbed him spoke over whatever objections she might have.

"Do you mind if young Harry is a few minutes later, Professor Sprout? I've promised him a word." Harry could practically hear the man wink as Professor Sprout's expression darkened, but apparently Lockhart was blind as well as stupid; he just smiled so wide Harry heard it, and pulled the door shut, saying, "That's the ticket."

Once the door was shut, Harry pulled out of his grip and glared up at him with all the might he could muster. He planned to scathe him up one side and down the other, but Lockhart didn't even appear to be registering his indignant stance at all.

"Harry, Harry, Harry. How wonderful to meet you. I always thought your parents were charming and skilled aurors, and it's such a delight to be able to teach their son. I hope you won't mind me having to go over stuff you likely already know, but I wanted to make sure you knew I'd be willing to give you tutoring. And your friends, too, of course; doubtless Neville will be thinking the same things, struggling to hold back. You two must be top in your class."

Harry dashed his hand between them and growled. "I'm sorry, Professor Lockhart," Harry injected as much venom as he could muster into the title, and apparently that registered, "But I have a class to be in and learning to do, not listening to you plump your own reputation. Good day."

Harry spun around and yanked open the door, slipping inside and slamming it shut. He turned around and quickly apologized to Professor Sprout. "Sorry ma'am. Trying to make sure no vermin get inside." His sickly sweet smile was met with an understanding look.

"No problems, Mr. Potter. The effort is understood. Please join your friends, and we'll begin." Harry gladly did so, and returned his attention to the front of the Greenhouse, where Professor Sprout stood, surrounded by her plants. Harry thought he recognized the plant, but he wasn't quite sure ...

"We'll be repotting mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the mandrake?"

Hermione shot her hand straight into the air, and Harry fought down a soft laugh.

"Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative," Hermione returned. "It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed into their original state."

"Excellent, ten points to Gryffindor."

Harry smiled fondly, and nudged Neville, who just gave him an exasperated look in return, and then he shot his own hand into the air next to Hermione's. Professor Sprout gave Hermione a fond look, but called on Neville. Harry had missed the question, but the answer made it clear.

"The mandrake's cry is fatal to all those who hear it, or it is when it's mature."

"Another ten points to Gryffindor. Now, these are indeed all young plants, as Neville observed, and so ..."

Class was pleasant enough. Hermione had a grand time from what he could tell, working off to the side with a curly haired Hufflepuff and Parvati Patil and someone else he didn't catch. He, Neville and Ron worked with a pleasant girl named Meghan Jones, and had little trouble with their plants. Harry remembered helping Remus with his own plants; he'd had a few Mandrakes one year, and had asked for help.

Transfiguration was next, and then lunch. Harry watched Neville flipping his spare button around, and settled down to eat.

"What do we have next?" Ron groaned.

"Defence Against the Poncy Git." Neville returned. He was flipping the button over his fingers, making Harry desperately want to hex him one, but Hermione interrupted.

"You are all being silly! I can't believe you could be so rude as to call what might be the most important class in school something so – so crass!"

"And is that why you've outlined all his lessons with red ink?" Ron snapped in return. Hermione glared once more, and stalked off. Harry snatched Neville's button out of his hands and threw it at Ron's head.

"Just because she's being crazy at the moment doesn't mean she's irredeemable. We'll just have to prove to her that Lockhart's a pansy." Harry returned. Ron glared for a moment, and then sighed, snagging his roll and standing.

"Fine then. Let's go get a seat so we can protect her from his evil."

Harry and Neville followed, Neville speaking up, "Lockhart's not quite evil though," At Harry and Ron's angry glares he raised his hands defensively, "Hold on, hold on. I'm just saying that Lockhart isn't evil quality. He's just an annoyance, a petty criminal. Not like Mr. Fear-My-Name of the seventies or Grindelwald."

Harry subsided and nodded slowly as they walked towards the classroom. "I suppose you're right. Lockhart's just annoying, not scary."

"But," Ron spluttered, "He's –He's manipulating Hermione! Making her head go weird! I won't stand for it!"

Harry looked at Ron a moment, and then nodded firmly. "You're right, that is intolerable. Where are your brothers, Ron? The twins? We need their help."

Ron looked at Harry several moments longer, his mouth hanging open loosely. Neville himself gave Harry an odd look before glancing around the courtyard. His eyes caught and stopped on the far corner, and Harry looked when he plucked at his sleeve. "Harry," Neville began, "You know how your dad said with Lockhart being so brazen his fans might bleed off the edges?" Harry paled drastically and looked rapidly around the courtyard for the nearest exit. "I can't find one that's not crowded, and that kid over there looks like he's stalking us with a camera."

Harry placed his head in his hands and moaned, and Ron glanced over where Neville was looking with a sickly expression.

"What's the problem?" Ron asked.

Neville gave a strangled smile. "Well, since my mom and dad are well known aurors and Harry's are the same, with all of them having an Order of Merlin of some class, we get a bit of fame from their reputations. With Lockhart here, everyone's on a fame kick and those that have any clout are going to get swamped and I don't want to be swamped with sycophants."

"Sycophants?"

Neville began to answer, but the boy with the camera was closer now, and he fell silent, plucking at Harry's sleeve again. Harry looked up and, knowing the courtyard had yet to clear, gave the boy a sickly smile that seemed to go right over his head.

"All right, Harry? Neville? I'm Colin Creevey, a Gryffindor." He stammered, his camera still brandished, ready to click. "Could I possibly have a picture of you two?" His expression was hopeful. Harry felt ready to kill something, presently leaning toward Neville who had ducked behind Ron as Colin approached.

"Um, I'd rather you not ... Why do you want a picture?" Harry hedged.

"So I can prove I met you." Colin wilted slightly at the negative answer. He blossomed again as he kept talking. "I've heard all about you, and Neville from the other students. You're really something. Your parents got all these awards, and you tried to save the school last year and succeeded! And if I develop the pictures right, they move! I never knew I was magical until I got my letter, and my dad's a milkman and he didn't know anything either. I'm going to send him a bunch of pictures so he can see. It'd be really good to have one of you, or Neville," His eyes flickered between them again, and rested on Ron and bugged slightly. "Him too! He's Ron, right? They say he helped you last year, him and a girl ..."

Ron turned several shades of red at being noticed, and Harry glanced over with a slight frown, flicking to find Hermione sitting under a tree with her book. He was half considering allowing a group picture of them – they had gotten themselves a place with their antics last year, although he really didn't do much other than cause more problems ...

"And could you sign it?"

Harry snapped back to look at him and firmly shook his head. "I'm not Lockhart, Colin, and I won't be signing pictures."

The denial came too late, though, and just to the side Draco Malfoy crowed, "Signed photos, Harry? You're giving out signed photos?"

Harry's dark glare did him little good, and Malfoy continued.

"Well then, everyone cue up to get your own photo. Maybe we should drag a few others in as well?"

"How about you sell your soul, Malfoy if you're so inclined to be a businessman?" Harry snarled. "Oh, wait. You don't have one!"

Malfoy glared back and sneered. "Just because you have aurors for parents won't keep you out of trouble, Potter! One of these days, you're going to get yourself in too deep!"

"As if you aren't already, Malfoy!"

Malfoy's eyes flashed, and he reached for his wand, as another voice cut in, one Harry liked even less than Malfoy. "What's this, what's this? Is someone causing a ruckus?"

Harry tried to slip back into the crowd, but the surrounding students seemed to be on Malfoy's side and clumped together. Anything to make him uncomfortable, Harry supposed. Ron and Neville had been stuck off to the side, and Malfoy looked only too glad for the attention. Harry could see when Lockhart noticed him; his eyes just seemed to light up several times over. Harry wanted to gag.

"Why Harry, are you being out of line? Tut tut, what shall we do? What started this pleasant little scuffle, hm?"

"Potter was giving out signed photos, sir, and took offence to me commenting on it."

Harry had never wanted to wring Malfoy's neck more than he did at that exact moment.

"Harry, Harry, Harry." Harry was beginning to think that line would herald every time Lockhart was about to start going off into his own little world. "Well, I shouldn't have asked. Who was it that was taking the pictures?"

As Colin stepped up, Harry glowered darkly at him, and quickly evaded Lockhart's grasping arm that tried to pin him to his side. The angle Lockhart had come in on was clear, and Harry felt pride be damned, he was getting out of there. He'd never been more glad for his seeker skills than at that moment as he darted out of the crowd and out of the courtyard, knocking aside a Ravenclaw girl and stammering an apology before he was back inside the castle. He knew he was going to absolutely hate Defence this year.

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The bell came too soon for Harry's liking, and he grudgingly made his way up to Defence, slipping into the far back with Neville and Ron, and, surprisingly, Hermione. However, looking to the front of the classroom made Harry's jaw hurt, and he finally just leaned over to Neville and ground out, "Why the Hell did you leave me there?"

Neville sighed. "Every man for himself; All's fair in war."

Harry punched him in the shoulder with a token irritation, and went back to glaring at Lockhart ahead of him, who was beaming over the class as everyone settled. Once it was quiet, he cleared his throat and picked up the nearest book to himself, *Travels with Trolls*, where his portrait beamed at them in almost the exact same manner as he himself was.

"Me," He said, pointing and winking along with the portrait. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, third class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award. But I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon banshee by smiling at her!"

"Could've fooled me." Ron muttered. Beside him, Lockhart seemed to be waiting for laughter, but only a few titters and smiles came his way.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books," Neville muttered something Harry thought would get his mouth washed out, "Well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about – Just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in ..." Harry and Neville looked at each other and gagged.

The test papers were handed out, and Lockhart returned to the front of the room, and said, "You have thirty minutes. Start – now."

Harry gagged as he looked at the questions, and Neville beside him moaned in time with Ron. This was the stupidest quiz he'd seen since Nanna had tried to quiz him on her birthday gift when she was five. A glance down the list made him grin wolfishly. Nanna's quiz had been a little better: She'd asked some questions not related to herself.

Harry scribbled down several nonsense answers, and tossed the paper in with the rest of them. Neville was pantomiming some mockery or other, and Harry just sighed sadly.

"And I had so looked forward to this class. Why am I cursed with horrendous teachers? Why can't my mom and dad get the job rather than all these bozos?"

Neville thumped his head on the desk sadly. "No clue. I'm wondering the same about my parents. Hell, Arthur Weasley would do better than Lockhart. No offence, Ron."

Ron shook his head, "No problem. It's true."

"There wasn't a single question on there that was anything really ... real in regards to defence." Harry whined. Hermione scowled at the end of their desks, and gave Lockhart a look Harry wouldn't have wanted directed at himself. She looked ready to pick him to pieces. It was kind of frightening ...

Lockhart began dissembling about the quiz once more, and Harry put his head down hard on the desk. He despaired of anything interesting happening in this class.

That was about two minutes before Lockhart had the smart idea to release the pixies. However, Harry wasn't his father's son for nothing. As soon as Lockhart had pulled out the cage, Harry had nervously organized his stuff for a quick retreat. Neville took one look at his actions and copied him, encouraging Ron to do the same. The cage was opened, and Harry swore before quickly ducking his books under the desk and slipping them into his bag.

"What kind of moron is he?" He growled, clutching his bag close so as to not have it ripped away. When the pixies did try and come his direction, Harry quickly froze them, much as Neville did from his place at Harry's back, his own bag clutched tight. Ron was defending Hermione and her books, and, after Lockhart made his astonishing blunder and lost his wand, Harry had had it.

"Neville, he's a moron. Five seconds to the door? Poke Ron."

Neville nodded shortly, and elbowed Ron, passing on the idea. Ron nodded enthusiastically, and grabbed his own bag, and several of Hermione's loose books, while Hermione grabbed the rest of her own with a militant expression towards the destructive creatures. When Neville poked Harry in return, Harry quickly darted past the other students to the door, Neville and the rest following quickly. Naturally, the rest of the class noticed and thought it was the greatest idea of the month. Harry and his friends were out in the corridor first, and the bell rang shortly thereafter. Harry grinned at the successful escape, but Hermione quickly began analyzing the lesson.

"I'm sure it was some hands-on demonstration he had going, releasing those pixies."

"Hermione," Ron whined, "Lockhart didn't have the faintest clue what he was doing!"

"But all of his books ..."

"Are likely rubbish." Harry snapped. "How about this? Dark Arts are usually spells from behind and poisons in food, right?" Hermione nodded. "Well then. Lets see how he fares when I ask the twins to 'test his reflexes'. Potions in his drinks, harmless of course, and spells on his chairs and out of nowhere. For, say, a month." Hermione looked caught between the rule breaking, and the desire to validate her opinion. "My parents did the same. He got caught in their spells every single time. He's not going to fare any better against Fred and George, I bet."

Hermione gave him a superior expression. "You have a deal. If he can't stop those two, then he's worthless. However, I believe you're only going to get Fred and George an undue punishment."

Harry laughed and clapped her on the shoulder. "I think the twins will just jump on the excuse, personally. They'd get in trouble anyways."

Hermione deflated some, and smiled weakly.

Harry grinned. Two points to him.

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The twins were more than happy to oblige Harry, and Harry made a point to write home that evening to tell his father to send a note from 'Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs' to the Weasley tricksters, along with whatever joke ideas they had in mind. Harry spared a piteous thought for Lockhart for half a moment before he went back to malicious glee at what sort of havoc would soon befall the school. However, in the meantime, the twins had to prepare and there were still classes to attend. Saturday, however, proved woeful. Harry had never liked waking before the sun, and although he could admire Oliver's enthusiasm, he would only do so once he was properly awake, rather than simply functioning. Getting to the pitch, however, proved difficult as Wood devolved into a rant. Only once he got into the air did Harry wake up properly, and he smiled until they glanced down and found a gathering of Slytherins beneath them. Wood was livid.

"How dare you! I booked the pitch today! I booked it! So clear off!"

Flint leered at Wood. "There's plenty of room, I'm sure. Besides, we've got special permission from Professor Snape to use the pitch, owing to us needing to train our new seeker." The team parted, and Draco Malfoy sneered out at Harry from between them. Off to the side, Harry distinctly heard someone snort.

"I still can't believe you'd taken bribes over talent, Flint."

All eyes snapped to the side, finding a rangy, dark boy and the slim form of Alan Prince reclined against the nearest stand. It was the dark boy who had spoken. Harry thought it was Blaise Zabini. Draco bristled, as did Flint. However, as Zabini said this, Harry noticed that the brooms held by the Slytherin team were all uniform, and very clean. Behind him, where Harry knew Neville and the others had been, he heard a disdainful snort, tinged with incredulity. Harry felt he'd been listening to Neville too long to be able to hear that, but it was Ron who spoke up.

"What's going on here?"

Draco sneered, his face turning ugly. "Just taking a look at the niceties enjoyed by families of merit, Weasley. Nothing special."

"Families of merit?" Prince drawled. "Oh, so that's what they're calling it now. Funny, I'd thought merit had something to do with skill, or acclaim. Not pure cash. I must be behind on the times." The curious tone he used didn't sound outright insulting, but Malfoy coloured anyways, turning a dark look Prince's way. Clearly, the hatred between them was mutual. It almost seemed as though Prince had bought more of Malfoy's hatred than he even spared Harry himself. Flint was glaring between the two in annoyance, and Wood as well as losing patience. Hermione finally broke in.

"Look, what's the whole issue here anyways? I thought Wood had the pitch this morning."

"No one asked your opinion, mudblood." Draco snapped.

Harry was surprised at the reaction that occurred. He'd thought he was the closest to Malfoy, but clearly he was wrong. Because,

somehow, it wasn't any of the Gryffindors who got their reaction in first, although Flint's move to protect Malfoy may have had something to do with it. Through the entire uproar that resulted from Malfoy using that horrible word, Harry saw that the one spell that made it through came at Malfoy from behind, from over where Prince was standing by the stand. Once the hubbub cleared down, as the Gryffindors noticed Malfoy's cursed state, it became clearer what had happened. Malfoy was now wrapped tightly in bandages from his shoulders to his hips, firmly pinning his arms to his sides. Bandages that refused to be cut, nor would they allow themselves to be spelled off. Flint was furious.

"Who did this? Which of you got through? You're going to be in so much trouble once this comes out. Hexing my seeker, would you believe it." Flint grumbled as he led Malfoy away. However, it was Prince who spoke after him.

"Well, if you want a seeker less likely to be hexed, I'm still up for the position. Maybe I won't be giving you nice brooms, but I can sure keep my mouth shut when it would be far more healthy to do so." Flint shot him a dark look, but Prince merely made a face and spoke to no one in particular. "Honestly. Inflammatory words in front of muggle-lovers. What kind of idiot is he?"

"Alan, you know already." Zabini placed his hand on Prince's shoulder and gave him a fake conciliatory look. "It's the bad genes. Too many cousins, too shallow a gene pool."

Prince snorted. "Shallow, my ass. It's a bloody puddle."

Harry watched Prince curiously, and then noticed Wood's angry expression as he looked at the two Slytherins. Deciding to try and keep hostility down and get answers, Harry turned to them and shot, "Prince, why did you hex Malfoy?" Behind him, the entire team fell silent. Prince gave him a confused look. Had Harry not clearly seen his expression when the hex had come from his direction, Harry would have thought himself mistaken. But Prince had had a horribly ugly look on his face as Malfoy called Hermione a mudblood, and Harry had no doubt he was the source of that particular hex.

"I didn't do anything, Potter. You think I'm crazy enough to hex someone behind Flint's back? I'm not a Gryffindor." The emphasis on the word made the rest of the team behind Harry stiffen, and Harry growled at Prince in irritation.

"I'll bet you're just jealous." Ron spat. "Didn't get on the team, did you? Malfoy beat you out?"

Prince snorted. "Hardly. There were no tryouts. Draco's father greased a few palms and the little albino got right on the team. Had they allowed tryouts, Draco would've ended up flat on his face." Prince gave Harry a sidelong glance. "It's not like he'll even be a challenge for little Potter here. I'd bet even Granger could beat Malfoy on a broom."

"Big words for a little kid." Wood snapped. "But we're still on the pitch, and I don't need you two hanging around."

Again, Prince gave them a superior look that seemed part-and-parcel with any Slytherin. "You'll just be catching flack for being out here once Pomfrey cleans Draco up. How about a little interhouse deal?" Prince added. Harry looked confused, and Wood gave Prince a cautious look. "Snitch chasing. Potter versus I." Prince gave Harry a sidelong glance. "I want to see who's faster, and then Flint can hardly complain the outcome."

"And you get to show up Malfoy." Harry added. "How do I even know this is going to be valid?" However, Wood was shaking his head.

"It's valid, Harry. Two kids of each house can easily make such a deal, and since you're in the same year, it'll hold. I think. Besides ..."

"It will." Prince returned, looking supremely unconcerned. "I've got Snape's word on it."

"And of course, you have your head of house's ear." Neville drawled. Somehow, he managed to almost make his voice sound nearly as unconcerned as Prince's. Prince gave him a wolfish grin in return.

"Good grades and work ethic do manage to accomplish something, Longbottom. I'm sure pretty Granger could have Flitwick wrapped around her pinkie finger if she gave it any effort."

Finally, Wood threw his hands in the air and snarled, "Why not. It'll give Potter practice at least and it's not like you're on the team. Have at it. You want me to release the snitch on your word?"

"Certainly, Wood. Thank you." Prince returned. He quickly turned out his pockets and unshrunk his broom when he found it. Harry gave the ragged broom a sceptical glance. The handle was clean, but nicked and scratched enough to make him wince. The twigs were clean and streamlined, but were coarse and of many colours. And normally brooms did not like shrinking. Prince noticed the attention and shrugged, barely concealing a gleeful look.

"It's a custom thing, from my uncle. You ready?" However, as he said so, Alan pulled a small black band from his pocket as well, and Harry stared as he affixed it over his right eye, effectively blocking his sight. Outraged, Harry slapped his shoulder, earning a fierce glare.

"Why in the bloody blue blazes are you doing that? It want it fair, Prince! You're not giving yourself a handicap."

Harry got such an innocent look in return he almost missed the flicker of other emotion hidden beneath. He maintained his fierce look though. He wanted a challenge, not some idle disrespect Prince seemed insistent on providing.

"I'm not handicapping myself." Prince insisted. "Tis only fair."

Harry didn't let his glare up the slightest. Instead, he held out his hand firmly and snapped, "Being half-blind if not fair. If you're wearing that, then I get one too. We're doing this on fair ground, no less."

He actually accomplished something he thought nigh impossible. Prince looked stunned. "Wait, what?"

"You're not handicapping yourself! Either take the bloody thing off, or I wear one as well!" The others on the quidditch team were watching

them in shock, but Harry maintained his stance staunchly, defending his right to a challenge. Finally, Prince fished another black cloth out of his pocket after some searching and handing it over with a confused expression, and a murmur Harry hoped he'd misheard. It had sounded dreadfully like, 'Maybe you belong in Gryffindor after all.' With the patch in place, Harry gave Wood a thumbs up.

Still flustered from the argument between the two boys, Wood took a moment to call out, "Three, two, one – Go!" He released the snitch, and both fliers took off, Harry pulling ahead quickly, watching the snitch intently with the half-sight he had. With his depth perception put off, however, he was having slight difficulty following the motion of the snitch, and he nearly lost it as it darted across to his new blind side. Harry nearly crashed into Prince as the other student miscorrected his own drift to follow. Harry had never been so fond of his natural skill on a broom as right then. He was certain he could fly blind if he didn't have to worry about possible obstacles. However, he had lost the snitch, but apparently Prince had not, and he was pelting across the pitch. Harry took off after him, but was surprised to find himself making no headway on the other boy's pace. Their brooms were completely matched for speed at this rate, and if he wasn't mistaken, Prince was gaining speed slowly and steadily as well. Harry caught up due to another rapid change in direction from the snitch, bringing it back his way, and up. Harry whipped after it, and then checked on Prince for a moment, one that turned into two as he stared.

Prince was still stopping; apparently his custom broom lacked the manoeuvrability of Harry's Nimbus, and he took time to turn. This made Harry wonder about his rather strange decision of a handicap for this match, and then his attention returned to find the snitch out of his immediate sight. Frantically, Harry scanned the pitch, and found the snitch darting off towards the stands to his far left, opposite the spectators on the ground, and he whipped after it, Prince copying him below. Due to differing angles, Harry maintained a lead on Prince, even as he slowly accelerated to match Harry's pace, and suddenly they were neck-to-neck in the chase towards the snitch, with Prince inching inexorably forward. However, the snitch was only a hand span away, and Harry inched forward and lashed out, snatching it from the air and braking sharply, letting Alan's lesser brakes pull him

down several feet away. His expression when he looked over at Harry was unreadable, but Harry knew his own was split in a grand smile. He whipped off the patch and held it out to Prince in turn.

"That was wonderful, Prince! Great chase!"

Prince gave him a wry smile. "It was. Gotta tell my uncle this is a substandard broom. I'm not about to have something second best. He'll have a fit, I'm sure." He accepted the patch back, and gave Harry's hand a firm shake. "Thanks for the game." Prince left first, floating back to the gathered Gryffindors, and, beyond them, the doors inside. Harry found more people in the crowd than there had been before, and he smiled as he saw Snape wearing a sour expression, standing behind the Gryffindors. He didn't even make it out of the air, though, as Fred and George mounted and flew up to him with wide smiles.

"You got it, Potter-kid!"

"Snape gave up the pitch to us, so we've got more game to play."

"Malfoy's still stuck in bandages too."

"Looks like whoever hexed him knew what they were doing."

"So we get to play on, and listen to Wood rant. Hope you didn't want lunch."

Harry grimaced. Quidditch was all well and good, but Wood was insane. He really was going to be working clean through lunch, even as Neville and the others made their way to the stands. Really. He liked lunch.

A/N: Well, the seventh book came out, and I will continue this story with few corrections, none of which affect for the posted chapters. I appreciate you reading this, and please review. It makes me happy. There will be a chapter posted next week to make up for a three week vacation I'll be taking during which I will most likely not be able to access my files. Trust, however, that I will still be posting every two weeks: I'm finished up to twenty-one chapters, of which more than half are currently being betaed and I should have them back before I

need them. The pace of posting ensures that I don't feel pressed to write fast and substandard. Thank you for following my story, and a hug to everyone who has reviewed.

F & N

Chapter Eight

Wood was indeed insane about training, and the only saving grace for the next month was Fred and George's reign of terror against Lockhart. James had been only too happy to encourage young pranksters, and with such a deserving target, the letter had gone out with even Remus happily adding his own advice.

Lockhart didn't even know what hit him.

Monday morning, the school was treated to the sight of Lockhart turning a sickly green colour – from his skin to his clothes. His hair turned grey. Harry watched with vindictive pleasure as a horrified expression crossed Lockhart's face. He changed it into a sad looking grin, as well, standing to give a strained bow to the Great Hall before he scuttled out of the room to escape the laughter of the student body. All of his classes that day were cancelled, and in the evening, Harry found the twins and told them to make the potions a little shorter, so they could catch him several times in a day. Of course, this left him having to duck to avoid getting pranked himself, and they moved back to their planning, which Harry happily left them too.

Pulling up his usual seat next to Hermione, Harry looked at her and gave her a warm grin.

"Twins, one. Lockhart, Zero."

Hermione made a face back at him, and sighed as she bent over her homework once more.

Lockhart didn't get a single day of peace for the next month. He got changed into a canary, hung from the ceiling, turned several different colours, had his voice changed, and anything else the twins could think of trying out on him. Sometimes it was three things in one day, sometimes it was just one. His classes were cancelled several times for him to cry in his office (at least, that's what Harry maliciously assumed he was doing). He managed to counter only about three of the spells and none of the potions. After the first week, he stopped trying to pretend he let the spells happen. Harry would forever remember with glee the day he walked into the classroom and had

his robes turn sticky and light brown, leading him to run from the room immediately thereafter, leaving behind the disgusting smell of diarrhoea.

Once the score made it to ‘Twins, twenty. Lockhart, three – sort of.’ Of which, Lockhart got his points due to being able to counter the twin’s actions, Hermione stopped defending him. Instead, she began to question him mercilessly when he did actually attend classes. Harry, Neville and Ron had never thought Hermione would be quite that vindictive, but once he started stumbling on his answers, Hermione’s eyes just glowed with fury and Harry just sat back to watch the drama with a wide grin. It was deliciously satisfying.

The only bad part about all of it, were the several classes when Snape took over teaching. He grumbled and stormed around the classroom, but he knew what he was talking about and Harry found it several times easier to listen and learn in a Defence classroom than in the Potions dungeon. Neville swatted him upside the head and informed him Lockhart must have melted his brain when he observed he almost liked Snape’s handling of the class better than when they had Dumbledore taking over. Harry just stuck his tongue out and returned to his homework.

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Finally, it slipped further into October, and Harry was grouchy, damp, and the Twins had been called off by a furious Wood who demanded they spend less time plotting against the useless waste of space, Wood’s words exactly, and get back in line so they would remain on the Quidditch team. With that threat in place, the pranks subsided and practices once more became the focus, with all the miserable rain, the rampant cold breakout, and one furious, sick Filch. After a close call in the front entry, Harry made sure to clean himself the moment he stepped out of the rain. However, the other problems that arose as the month wore on, was Lockhart.

Lockhart had regained his aplomb as the pranks stopped, apparently thinking, and occasionally hinting that the pranksters had grown wary of his possible retaliation, and went back to his old habits. In classes, he tried to pull Harry to the front and have him demonstrate, but Harry

flat out refused, and Hermione usually sniped in to save him with a question that would throw Lockhart for a loop again. However, even she couldn't keep Harry safe in the halls, to and from Quidditch practice, nor could she help at the practice. Lockhart had tried, several times, to pull Harry aside and give him some stupid pointers about playing Seeker when he clearly knew how to do fine himself. Fred and George considered this free target practice once Harry assured them he could get out of the way plenty fine on his own. Instead, Lockhart got himself knocked out once, and chased off the pitch several times. After the practice, however, Harry had to make use of several passages to get out of his way.

One Saturday, Harry, however, needed to deal with his homework and ask Flitwick a question. Passing just beyond the library, however, he spotted Lockhart, who, upon seeing him, called out and waved eagerly.

"Harry! How good to see you, I wanted to check with you if you're absolutely sure of that answer you gave. I think it's not quite right ..."

Harry didn't wait to hear more and quickly darted into the library, giving Madam Pince a tight smile and jogging into the deeper parts in search of a dark and hidden table. Once there, in the darkest corner he knew of which was surrounded by several questionable books and a few short fiction novels, he dropped into a chair and hissed through his teeth. He jumped when someone spoke up.

"What are you doing back here?"

Harry looked swiftly to the source of the voice, and found it a moment later. Prince's pale face almost glowed in the dark shadows, turning his eyes into black pits beneath his rigidly straight hair. He was watching Harry with curiosity, and Harry shook himself before answering and standing with a scowl.

"Sorry, I was just avoiding Lockhart. I didn't know you were back here. I'll get off, then."

"You don't have to leave." Prince drawled.

Harry looked back at him and found him to have his nose pressed into his book once more, not even looking at Harry.

“Pardon?” Harry asked. He didn’t think a Slytherin would stand for a Gryffindor to be nearby. Prince certainly wasn’t an exception about any other Slytherin qualities.

Prince gave him a short look that once again made him sure he’d just asked a stupid question, making him bristle slightly. “The library is public, and you can sit here if you want. Just don’t make Lockhart think to come back here. I don’t want to see that idiot any more than you do.” He turned back to his book, and added with a negligent wave. “I think mutual hatred of some moron is a good enough excuse to let you back here whenever you need. Nobody owns any part of this library exclusively, you know.”

Feeling both mildly confused, and strangely grateful, Harry sank into a chair once more, stifling his slightly nervousness. He sat in silence, glancing around at the books in the area with silent eyes. There were a lot of Defence oriented books, and a few Potions ones as well, ones Harry had never seen before. A few others looked like references, and novels, and Harry smiled tightly as he stood and observed several. Finding a thick Defence tome, he pulled it back with him and propped it up, flipping through to read. Prince wasn’t even looking at him, instead focusing with his face buried in his own tome of Potions of some sort. Harry hadn’t though it would be this comfortable to just sit with Prince, but it was strangely relaxing and invigorating at the same time. He wasn’t feeling safe right then, but the energy between them just seemed to feel … right.

Enjoying the strange calm, Harry fell into he book and began to read, forgetting entirely his desire to go find Flitwick. This felt much better. It felt right.

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Halloween was a glorious feast, and Harry had never been so glad of the food before now. He’d seen the pumpkins Hagrid had been growing were gloriously beautiful in the room, and the dancing skeletons were both rather disturbing and highly amusing. All in all, it

was a glorious meal, and he was glad to have been there. However, it left him very ready for bed to have such a heavy meal in his belly. Leaving with everyone else, Harry laughed with Neville and Hermione as Ron nearly stumbled into the wall again. As some of the first to leave, they were still behind a layer of other children, and Harry rather suddenly ran into another student's back as they abruptly came to a halt. Gently pressing them aside and slipping to the front, Harry stared with the rest of the students at the scene before them. Mrs. Norris hung from a torch bracket, and beside her, in gleaming letters on the wall, were the words

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Harry stepped back with a slight slosh, glancing down and grimacing at the water beneath his feet. Behind him, he felt a stir, and he jumped as Malfoy shouted behind him,

“Enemies of the heir, beware! You’ll be next, mudbloods!”

Harry turned angry eyes on Malfoy, his teeth bared in a snarl. The shining belief Malfoy wore on his face only served to make Harry angrier, and he moved to lunge forward. Neville quickly grabbed his arms and heaved him back against himself, stumbling slightly. Harry had never been angrier with Neville hitting his growth spurt until then, and he snarled once more.

“What’s going on here!”

Harry stopped as Argus Filch pushed forward, and Harry felt a shiver of unease. Filch wasn’t going to be happy ...

“My cat!” Harry winced. He hadn’t wanted to be right about that. “My cat! What happened to Mrs. Norris?” Filch scanned the gathered students and fixed his angry glare on Harry where he stood with Neville still gripping his arm! “Did you, Mr. Potter? What –“

“Argus.” Dumbledore rumbled. Harry tried to shrink back into the crowd once more, and Neville wasn’t arguing, except that

Dumbledore pressed right past them. He went up to the bracket and freed Mrs. Norris from her place, before fixing Filch with another look. “Come with me, Argus. None of these need kept from their beds any longer tonight.”

Lockhart pressed forward eagerly, drawing them off to his office. Harry and Neville were drawn along as the prefects and the remaining teachers ushered the students back to their common rooms. Falling in step with Ron and Hermione, Harry and Neville went silently, until they reached the common room and drew Hermione with them to their usual seats. Harry leaned forward immediately and glared at Neville.

“I know I shouldn’t have gone after Malfoy, but it still would’ve been nice if you’d let me hit him at least once.”

Neville snorted. “Well, really, by all means. I’ll be sure to let you deck another student in front of the Headmaster next time then. Why not just throttle him at the next quidditch match? You have enough skill drawing and avoiding bludgers, just make sure one of those connects with his empty skull. Then absolutely nobody will complain. Flint can’t even complain.”

“Fine.” Harry growled. “What do you think happened to Mrs. Norris?”

“She was perfectly stiff.” Hermione chimed in. “That’s not normal for death, unless they’ve been dead for a long time, I don’t think.”

“Petrification?” Neville asked. “But the list of things that can petrify is pretty short, and I don’t think any of them are likely to be in the castle.”

“Nah, best thing that comes to mind for me is a basilisk.” Harry added. “And as if one of those would be haunting the corridors.”

Hermione looked between them rather quickly and frowned once more. “Why would you think a basilisk wouldn’t be in here? Are they common?”

Harry gave her a long look and then sighed. “I keep forgetting you’re muggle-born, since you know so much. No, they’re not common and they’re frightfully deadly. A basilisk will kill with its sight, and it has extremely deadly poison. Petrification occurs upon indirect exposure to the basilisk’s sight, but again, they’re rare and how would it be in the castle anyways? They tend to grow forever and can end up getting huge. And only one attack? You’d have to have a parseltongue to keep the snake in line and not killing randomly. It’s impossible to hide a basilisk.”

“Nigh impossible.” Neville corrected. Harry glared at him once more, and then stood, fighting down a yawn.

“Whatever. As much as it was horrible Mrs. Norris died, I still don’t really care. Dumbledore will take care of it, I’m sure.”

Neville and Ron joined him in preparing to go to their beds, but Harry heard Hermione grumble a parting phrase under her breath.

“Hopefully he’ll do better than he did last year in ‘taking care’ of things.”

The thought haunted him as he lay down to bed that night. He desperately wished Hermione hadn’t brought that up.

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In the morning, no one could talk about anything but Mrs. Norris. An announcement stating the immediate investigation was made at breakfast, and talk had spread faster than the flu. It was Ron, however, who gave Harry the crazy idea that tore him from breakfast early, in one single line.

“I can’t believe this. And none of the Slytherins look at all surprised, either. I’ll be it was one of them who pulled it off.”

Startled, Harry scanned the Slytherin table and found one face missing. Not seeing Alan, Harry stood, finished his drink, and grabbed some toast before waving shortly to Neville and leaving. He knew Neville would tell the others to leave him alone; Neville knew

him well enough that if he didn't invite him, he didn't want him around. Thus, he made his way to the library relatively unnoticed, and slipped into the back with quick steps, walking towards the silent, dark corner on the far end. As he'd expected, under a good guess, Alan was seated at the table, looking half-ready to stand and leave, two books stacked on the edge of the table and one in front of his nose. He looked up to find Harry there and closed his expression as he did so.

"Hello Potter. I didn't think anything could tear you from breakfast."

Harry grimaced. "There are a few things certainly. I wanted to ask, do you know anything about what happened to Mrs. Norris?"

Alan looked speculative. "What happened to Mrs. Norris?"

"You haven't heard?" Harry queried.

"No."

"She was paralysed last night, just after the feast. Hung on a torch bracket next to some bloody kind of writing on the wall, saying 'The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir, beware.' It's the talk of the school, and you haven't heard?"

Alan shook his head slowly. "I've been looking a few things up. Haven't talked to anyone recently. I'll have to ask Snape about it, then. Excuse me." Alan stood quickly, gathered his books, leaving the one he'd been reading behind, and hurried to check out his books.

Harry watched him go, thinking. He'd not thought Alan could look that concerned. He'd half think the boy liked Mrs. Norris to look so pale at the news.

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Of course, the next few days were full of talk and chatter as the school always was. Filch was miserable at the loss of Mrs. Norris, making students miserable in turn and stalking the scene of the crime. Ron and Hermione both were very curious, and Neville certainly wasn't disinterested. Harry was amused to find that Neville was the

one offering cautions this year, rather than Hermione. However, Hermione did get them a good explanation from Binns about what the Chamber of Secrets was. Harry hadn't even thought Binns would notice if a student stood and danced naked on their desk in the middle of his class, much less put their hand up. But, apparently there was some premise for this chamber issue: Salazar Slytherin hadn't trusted muggleborns. Although Ron immediately called him loony, Harry found himself mentally disagreeing: In a time where muggles feared and hated witches and wizards, he'd be cautious too about bringing students to such a central location.

However, the bustle died down as the days passed, and then it was once again time for Quidditch. Facing Malfoy while he was on the fastest broom presently out was nerve-wracking, but after being reminded by Neville of the number of times Malfoy had nearly crashed clean into them during the many youth parties, Harry wasn't so scared anymore. After all, you'd have to have talent to make any use of more speed. Neville was proof enough of that.

The school began to empty at around eleven o'clock, and as Harry left, he was surprised to bump into Prince and hear a soft 'good luck' before he split off to walk with Zabini. Harry watched him go curiously. He hadn't thought Prince would care.

Wood gave his usual pep talk, and then they were out on the pitch, looking at the muggy sky and listening for the whistle to start. Harry met Malfoy's eyes across the pitch and found himself smirking wickedly. Malfoy was in for a world of hurt if he thought money would save him on the pitch.

The whistle to take off was never more welcome, and Harry found himself in enough of a mood to take off completely vertically, shooting into the air and levelling out well above the pitch. A smile graced his face, and he turned to watch the green blur that was Malfoy streak across to come by him and sneer,

"All right there, Potter?"

"Never been better!" Harry yelled back, and shot straight towards him. Malfoy scrambled out of his way and looked frantically in the direction

Harry had shot. However, Harry pulled his straight course into a light circle to spin across the pitch and watch the game below. He looked down in time to see Alicia score the first goal of the game, and hear Lee Jordan cheer into the mic, screaming, “And it’s Gryffindor’s goal first! 10 – zero, Gryffindor!”

Harry grinned once more, and then pulled off course to avoid a chance bludger. It came back at him on the way down, and Harry rolled again, enjoying the flying for what it was and scanning the pitch for the snitch. He found nothing, but saw that Malfoy was watching him more than looking for the snitch. Curious, Harry grinned, scanned the pitch again quite obviously and then focused suddenly on a point next to one of the stands. Pressing forward, Harry shot straight towards it, vindictively thinking, ‘Lets see how fast that broom stops, Malfoy’

As he’d expected, Malfoy was no more than seconds behind him and he pushed his own broom for less than it was worth, letting Malfoy catch up, which he did so with glee. They were flying straight at the stand, and Harry almost thought he himself saw a glint nearby, but a second look proved it to be nothing more than a watch. He grew ever closer, and then firmly pulled off just in time to see Malfoy do a much less refined move to stop himself from crashing headlong into the stand. A dull thump proved he’d barely managed it, and Harry called,

“Fast broom there, Malfoy. Good to see you know how to use the brakes!” Harry then pulled up away from the action of the main pitch, but his eyes locked immediately onto a glint that wasn’t near a stand or person: The snitch. Harry flattened his broom out and shot after it, but Malfoy, still wary of his previous fake out, didn’t immediately follow until Flint screamed at him to go after him. It was a little too late, though, and Harry, after nearly having to go through the goal hoop, snatched the golden ball from the air to the ecstatic cheers of his house. Wood nearly threw himself at him, crying for joy, even as the day finally opened up and began to rain.

It was on the way back in, however, that Harry heard something to pull him up. Passing the stands inside, he overheard Malfoy getting chewed out by his father, and, not wanting to miss this, he paused and ducked out of sight.

"-Missed it entirely, you should have been trusting yourself, not that lackwit hooligan. You lost your position on your own, and I'm sorry to have to say I'm ashamed of you. You should know how to fly better than that."

"Its all Prince's doing." Malfoy muttered back to his father. "He's always been against me. He shouldn't! We're both Slytherin –"

"You should be able to act for yourself!" Harry bit his lip as he heard Malfoy get slapped. Oh, that wasn't supposed to happen! "You lost your position on the team by your own actions, and you can forfeit your broom to him as well. Severus wasn't about to let someone likely to make his team lose play, and you just proved that you're worthless. Now go polish up your essay! If I hear one more whine about losing to that mudblood ..."

Harry quickly got up and left, scampering up the stairs to find his way to the dorms. Malfoy had lost his position as Seeker? Harry was fairly sure he knew who would be taking over, but why? He could certainly understand that Malfoy was terrible: he barely managed to stop from crashing headlong into the stand when he'd been faked out, but for his father to get so hung up on it so as to hit him ... He wasn't comfortable with that. He'd be sure to write his dad about that; maybe they'd be able to get him in trouble for being abusive, although he didn't hold out much hope. Almost all the older purebloods were like that, thinking they had a right to hit their kids and wives. Catching them was what was difficult. Even Malfoy didn't deserve that ...

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The next morning, Harry had a little more to think about than Malfoy. As he went with Neville and Ron down to the Great Hall for breakfast, they passed by Professors McGonagall and Flitwick. They only heard a short amount, but it was enough.

"-Last night, Dumbledore found him on his way to the kitchens, stiff as a board, his camera in hand."

"Colin Creevey? Oh dear. It – it can't be open again, can it?"

"Dumbledore believes so. He is more curious about how, though ..."

They passed them by without being seen, but a glance shared between them all told wonders of what they thought. This wasn't good. At breakfast, the argument came up again, and Ron had an immediate suspect.

"I'm betting its Malfoy causing all this trouble." He snapped. Neville lay down his fork quietly, and then returned to his meal without saying anything. Harry knew that meant he didn't believe what he was hearing, and didn't think words would help. If only he felt that way ...

"I don't think it would be Malfoy, Ron. His father –"

"Could easily have opened it before and then passed on the key!"

Harry sighed and growled; "I don't think his dad would have slapped him last night if he were willing to hand over something so valuable."

Ron fell dead silent and Hermione gasped. Neville spun to look at him.

"Malfoy's dad hit him?"

Harry nodded darkly. "He's off the Quidditch team, too. I think that was Snape's initiative. Likely, they put Prince on, because he's got better skill than Malfoy, easily. But Malfoy's dad wasn't happy about it."

"He wouldn't be." Neville murmured. "But he may have still handed over the ... whatever, for the chamber. If it was an heirloom, he would have handed it down no matter what at a certain age and if Malfoy was in a bad mood ..." Neville stabbed at the air with his fork and looked into space. "But what could it be ..."

Harry shook his head and dug in once more, thinking that maybe he'd have a question next time he met Prince in the library. Of course that would have to wait. Neville, Ron, and Hermione were all insistent on remaining with him, and in fact, he didn't get any free time over the weekend.

Come Monday, the news about Colin was everywhere, and the first years were all terrified. Ginny, nervous and slightly distraught over the news, actually joined them at breakfast Monday morning and tucked close by them. The only uncomfortable thing about it all was that she had taken a disconcerting habit of clinging to Harry, rather than her brother, something that made Harry very uncomfortable. Neville's pointed effort to keep himself from laughing wasn't helping matters any.

Beneath all of them was a rampant trade in protective talismans. Percy was heard ranting and raving at several students who had been giving them out, and while he was ranting, Neville nicked a purple pointed gem from his pile. Harry gave him a leery look and Neville grinned before tapping it and mouthing, 'amethyst'. Harry rubbed his temples and sighed. Neville was weird.

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Finally, several days later, Harry got some time to himself and made his way into the library. If he heard one more theory about Malfoy being the one opening the chamber, and one more hint that they needed to find some way to question him about it, he'd throttle the idiot. Even if it was Ron. He stalked immediately into the library and to the back corner, and paused in confusion as he found Prince curled at the bottom of a shelf in the main part of the library. Curious, Harry walked over and glanced at the books around him. They were creature books, about different magical beasts, and Harry crouched and glanced over the title Prince had selected, 'Deadly Beastes of Yore' Harry cleared his throat, and Prince immediately shut the book and looked over at him before hissing something Harry thought must be rude under his breath.

"Potter, don't startle me. What do you want?"

Had Harry not been talking with Prince for the last few weeks, he would have been insulted. Instead, Harry just found his insistence amusing, and returned the favour,

"Is Malfoy the one attacking the school?"

Prince's face contorted into an unreadable expression. Harry caught a glimpse of frustration above it all. "No." Prince curtly replied. "Else I'd have throttled him long before now. I have no clue what's causing it, I can't even think of any magical creature that would do it."

"What about a basilisk?" Harry offered, standing with Prince as he moved to return the book to the shelf. Prince stopped.

"Basilisk's kill on sight."

"Indirectly they petrify."

"Mrs. Norris? Creevey had his camera, but her ..."

"There was water on the floor. She could have seen the reflection."

Prince shook his head, but pulled the book out once more. "Why are you even thinking about a basilisk anyways?" He asked, flipping through the pages and wandering slowly towards the back corner they usually spoke in. Harry shrugged, feeling mildly uncomfortable.

"I've always liked snakes. If I weren't afraid of what my dad would think, I'd have asked for a pet snake rather than an owl."

Prince gave him a sharp look, and placed his book down slowly. Realizing what he'd admitted, Harry swallowed and paled. He had not meant to say that. After a moment, Harry forced himself to meet Prince's gaze with his own, wanting him to not ask any questions about it. Prince met his eyes for several long moments, before he glanced away.

"You need to remember to keep your face relaxed if you want to intimidate someone, you know." Prince drawled.

Harry blinked. That was so incongruous with what they were discussing Harry wasn't sure he'd heard right. "What?"

Prince grinned coldly. "Your face. You couldn't keep someone out of your business with a look like that. It's pathetic."

Harry glowered at him, growing slowly irritated. "Well, if you're going to pick me apart, I think I'll just leave. Thanks for the answer all the same." Harry stood and left swiftly, more irritated than he'd been before. Telling him to hide his expressions, that he should act like some Slytherin and fake it. Harry wasn't a Slytherin, and he didn't have to act like one. Prince should know that, the Slytherin himself.

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One week before holidays, a notice about a duelling club went up in the front Hall. It was a general consensus that it would be a grand event, and thus Harry, Neville, Ron and Hermione were all present in the Great Hall that evening. Neville took one look at the golden stage and groaned.

"Not him. Anyone but him. Hell, I'd take Snape over him." Harry elbowed him in the side and sneered. Neville stared at him for several long moments, and Harry couldn't figure out why, so he just tempered his expression and jerked his head towards the stage.

"Might as well enjoy him making a fool of himself, then."

Neville cautiously nodded, still watching him oddly.

Lockhart came upon the stage dressed in robes of deep plum. Harry faked gagging in time with Neville and Hermione huffed but didn't tell them to stop. She still was hoping he could bring himself some credit once more, and Harry wasn't going to ruin a good thing by bugging her about it.

"Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can everyone hear me?"

"Unfortunately." Ron muttered. Harry and Neville snickered.

"Now Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little duelling club, to train you all up in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions – for full details, see my published works.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," Lockhart said with a smile.

Neville spoke over him, "I'd be running away if Snape directed that look my way; is Lockhart mad?"

"Absolutely barmy!" Ron insisted.

" – Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry; you'll still have your Potions Master when I'm through with him, never fear!" Lockhart finished.

"I'm more terrified of you fashion sense." Harry drawled, straight-faced. Neville laughed, and Ron sighed.

"Wouldn't it be great if they finished each other off?" Ron muttered.

Harry caught a glare coming their way from among the students and found it to be Prince. When Prince noticed Harry's attention on him, he jerked his chin up and looked at Ron again in irritation. Harry just shrugged and went back to looking at the stage. Why on earth would Neville be irritated with Ron? He supposed as a Slytherin he'd actually like Professor Snape, but everyone knew the other houses did not. Why would he expect different?

Lockhart and Snape faced each other and bowed, Lockhart with much excessive flourish and Snape in a reticent manner. Their wands were raised like swords, and they faced each other at either end of the stage.

"As you see, we are holding out wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

Neville sighed in feigned disappointment, and Harry elbowed him to point him towards Snape with a faint smile.

"One – Two – Three –"

Snape's spell got through first. "Expelliarmus!" Scarlet light flashed, and Lockhart went tail over teakettle off the stage. Neville, in a fit of precocity, stood and stepped forward and started clapping loudly, smiling brilliantly at Snape. Several other students joined in, and Snape looked at Neville in a mixture of confusion and disgust. Hermione squealed lightly, but refrained from speaking, merely staring after Lockhart in concern, and watching him unsteadily regain his feet.

"Well, there you have it!" He announced, tottering back to the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm. As you see, I've lost my wand – thank you, Ms. Brown. Yes, excellent to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy. However I felt it would be instructive for them to see ..."

Hermione managed to look just as disgusted as Professor Snape did, and Harry found himself seeing Lockhart doing something intelligent in redirecting the general focus. "Enough demonstrating! We're going to split into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me ..."

The crowd was quickly split. Neville ended up against Justin Finch-Fletchey, and Snape reached Ron and Harry first. Ron was placed against Seamus, and Harry was directed to Malfoy, Hermione to Millicent Bulstrode. Harry couldn't help but noticed that Zabini and Prince were paired together. Well, weren't they just peachy.

"Face your partners and bow!" Lockhart directed from the platform. Harry jerked his head in kind to Malfoy's own. "Wands at the ready, when I count to three cast your charms to disarm your opponent – only to disarm them, we don't want any accidents. One ... Two ... Three"

Harry dodged as Malfoy cast on two, and returned with a firm 'Expelliarmus' in turn. Malfoy dodged, and a second spell came his way, 'Tarantallegra!' Harry reciprocated with 'Rictusempra!' and Malfoy began to laugh. Harry had dodged his spell, and quietly cast 'Silencio' at Malfoy, cutting off his laughter and any further spells.

Lockhart screamed for a halt, but Snape managed much better with a call of “Finite Incantatem” Malfoy stood with a furious look for Harry, but Harry took that moment to glance around the room, through the green haze now drifting about. Justin was on the floor, with Neville helping him up; Seamus and Ron were both apologizing to each other, slightly red-faced. Hermione, however, was in a headlock by Millicent, and Harry quickly went to pry Millicent off. Neville quickly helped, and the bulkier girl let up and walked off. Lockhart skittered around, offering advice and worrying, until he finally announced once more,

“I think I’d better teach you how to block unfriendly spells,” Lockhart said. Neville muttered something that would get his mouth washed out, and Harry grinned weakly. Lockhart glanced at the furious Snape, and looked across the room once more. “Let’s have a volunteer pair, Malfoy and Potter, how about you?”

Harry glared at Malfoy in turn, and grudgingly went to the middle of the hall, where the rest of the students parted to give them space. Lockhart came up behind Harry and Harry purposefully edged away from him with a disgusted look.

“Now Harry,”

“I know the basic shield spell, Lockhart.” Harry offered. Lockhart didn’t seem to hear, and just continued, once again trying to get far closer than Harry was comfortable with.

“When Draco points his wand at you, you do this.”

Lockhart raised his wand and attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart picked it up, and Harry felt his face grow disgusted, as Lockhart muttered, “Oops, my wand is a little over-excited.” He cleared his expression as Lockhart looked up though, feigning indifference no greater than before. He saw Snape lean down to whisper in Malfoy’s ear, and Malfoy smirked at him across the room. Harry firmly reminded himself of the proper shield charm and met his stare with confidence. Malfoy deflated some, but faced him none-the-less. Harry barely heard him whisper,

“Scared?”

Harry just smirked back and mouthed, “You wish.”

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder, “Just do what I did, Harry.”

“What, drop my wand?” Harry asked, askance. He couldn’t believe this man!

Lockhart wasn’t listening. “Three – Two – One – Go!”

Malfoy raised his wand and bellowed, “Serpensortia!”

Harry watched in shock as a long black snake fell from the end of Malfoy’s wand, landing in a coil between them. Harry swore, staring straight at the snake, and barely heard those around him.

“Don’t move, Potter.” Snape drawled, “I’ll get rid of it.”

“Allow me,” Lockhart shouted. Harry had never felt so scared as he did when Lockhart offered to try and do something. But Lockhart brandished his wand anyways, and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back down with a painful smack. Hissing furiously, it turned and slithered towards the nearest student, Justin Finch-Fletchey, and prepared to strike.

Harry, startled, nervous, and confused at the cacophony of voices, stepped forward to yell, directing his voice at the snake, screaming “Leave him be!” The snake, as he had come to expect, but still didn’t understand, subsided and coiled back to the floor, watching him carefully. Harry sighed, and glanced at Justin and felt something cold drop into his stomach. Justin was staring at him, scared and furious.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” Harry watched him run from the room, and, as suddenly as he had acted, he realized with cold dread what had just happened, and what was still happening. The room was dead silent; the furious, and irritated voice he’d heard had been the snake’s. Harry looked cautiously over at Snape, who

casually vanished the creature behind him, and ran straight out of the hall.

A/N: Here's another chapter extra as a tide for the lack in the next three weeks. Enjoy, please review.

Fire and Napalm

Chapter Nine

Harry didn't know why he went into the back of the library rather than to his dorm. It was probably because he didn't want to explain himself to Neville or Ron or the others. All he knew was that he definitely wanted to rescind his request to head home for Christmas and just stay here in hiding until after his father had calmed down from finding out, through the grapevine rather than his son, that his oldest was a parselmouth.

Harry had never connected his interest in snakes with being a parselmouth. There were a few snakes in the forest around their house, but he never ran into any, and he'd most certainly never heard them speak. However, it appeared that that interest was more than he'd expected, and he was a parselmouth. Harry furiously slammed his fists into the table and laid his head on his arms. He didn't want this. There were going to be so many rumours around the school, so much talk and bustle and they were going to stare at him. He didn't need all this, on top of all the attacks –

Harry froze and said something vile enough his mother would have cursed him silent. Serpent-tongue. Slytherin. Harry was going to be labelled immediately as the one behind the attacks and he couldn't very well argue. Harry swore a few more times and then simply lay there, chasing his thoughts furiously in circles and getting nowhere.

It was several minutes later before Harry heard someone place a book on the table before him. Harry looked up with a glare and found himself staring at Alan Prince.

"Why are you here?" Harry snapped.

"I believe I found my way down here before you ever did, so I'd thank you to not act like you own the place." Prince returned. He sounded completely normal, and looked down at Harry with a raised eyebrow. Harry only barely realised he'd been crying and quickly looked away, wiping his face on his sleeve and forcing himself back into composure. Once he felt more steady, he looked sidelong at Prince and snapped,

"You're not going to start thinking I'm the heir of Slytherin or something are you?"

Harry couldn't be sure, but it almost looked like Prince flinched before he relaxed once more. "Why would I believe something so hare-brained as that? You're only a parseltongue." Harry looked down and missed the soft look Prince shot his way before he continued speaking. He did, however, hear the soften tone in his voice. "I'd heard parseltongue was a gift that, although it normally follows a line, can sometimes show up by chance in another."

Harry looked at him, irritated and snapped. "I've never heard that one. Who told you that?"

Harry saw the hesitation on Prince's face this time, and then he jumped as instead of speaking, Prince hissed and Harry clearly understood him. "My uncle, when I found out I had the talent myself."

Harry had never been more shocked in his life. He stared blankly at Prince, knowing he was staring, knowing he looked absolutely gobsmacked and not caring in the least. "You're a parseltongue too?" Harry heard the hissing as he spoke, and clapped his hand over his mouth.

Prince sighed and nodded, shaking his head slightly, and looking down at his book. "Yes." He answered normally. "I was just as shocked as you when I found out ..." He trailed off, clearly considering and discarding a thought. "Obviously, it's not something I bring up often. Even among Slytherins it wouldn't be wise."

"No ..." Harry whispered. He closed his eyes slowly and fell silent. Prince watched him a moment longer before returning to his book, and Harry finally stood and looked around the books there. They had many, on various topics, and as Harry browsed them over, Prince piped up.

"Just to your left, and down a shelf should be a book on parseltongues. It's ... biased, but otherwise accurate. Titled 'Serpent-Tongue'."

Harry found the book and pulled it back to the table. He opened it, and began to read.

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“Harry, where on earth were you?”

Harry entered the common room several hours later, and was immediately faced with a panicked Neville. Glowering at the tone, Harry walked past him and went up to the dormitory, Neville trailing worriedly behind and Ron and Hermione quickly picking up their things to follow.

Harry flopped down immediately onto his bed and Neville sat on his own just opposite him, worrying his lip between his teeth and watching him carefully. Harry didn’t answer yet, but when Neville heard Ron coming up, he stood and stepped outside the door. Harry could hear him from where he lay.

“Ron, please just got back downstairs for a moment. I want to talk to Harry alone.”

“Neville, I’m not going to let him think I –I believe all that crap they’re throwing around now! They all think he’s the heir of Slytherin or something, and I don’t want him to think that.”

“He won’t, Ron, not of you or Hermione, since he can likely hear you quite clearly from where he is. But Ron, I need to talk to him brother-to-brother, okay? Please? You can come in in a few minutes, just leave us alone for right now.”

Neville stepped back through the door and shut and locked it behind himself, spelling it shut in turn against Hermione’s ‘alohomora’. Neville turned around, and Harry gave a lopsided smile from where he lay. The bed shifted as Neville sat on the end, and Harry sighed, sitting up and fishing the book out of his bag to toss Neville’s direction.

“What’s this?”

“Look on page 38, beginning of third paragraph.”

Neville flipped it open, glanced at Harry, and muttered the lines to himself.

"The ability parseltongue is, however, unusable in the absence of a snake, or, upon rare occasion, the presence of a fellow parselmouth." Neville glanced up at him in surprise, and back down at the page. "The ..."

"That's all." Harry interrupted.

"Where'd you find this book, Harry?" Neville looked it over. "Is it all about parseltongue?"

"Yeah," Harry returned. "It was in the library, somewhere near the back. It's got a lot of information and little of use. Just talking about what you can do with it, and a bit of speculation. Like parseltongue spells, or the language, or other affinities."

"Think you'll be a snake if you're an animagus because of it?" Neville asked.

"No clue. Only thing it says is that transfigured snakes are also understandable. So, if it's serpentine, I can understand it."

Neville fell silent, flipping through the book for a time, but he shortly shut it and lay it down on the bed. "You going to stay here for Christmas?"

"You think I'd go home? I'll give him till summer to calm down."

Neville paused, and remained silent for several moments. "Nanna's going to throw a tantrum that you're not returning. Your mom will likely send a howler for you not coming."

Harry pulled his knees to his chest and murmured into his legs, "Better than facing my dad after this. He's going to be so angry."

Neville finally had it, and slapped Harry's shoulder. "Why are you freaking out so much anyways? You don't know what he's going to

say! It's says in that bloody book that it sometimes happens randomly! It doesn't make you evil, or dark, or a Slytherin just because you can talk to snakes!"

Harry growled and spat, "It's a dark gift, what does that tell you?"

Neville glared once more, his arms twitching before he ground out, "You're such a thick-headed spoiled brat. I'm not talking to you until you get your head out of your bloody arse."

Harry watched him storm out of the room, and wrenched his curtains shut before Ron could come inside. He didn't want to talk to anybody. Nobody understood. Nobody.

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Harry avoided breakfast that morning, and only came out of his room because of lessons. When he heard that Herbology was cancelled, he retreated back into the dorm and remained there. Neville had, upon his arrival, chosen the other side of the room to remain on, not even acknowledging his presence. Neither hadn't said one word to anyone since the night before, not even to Ron or Hermione, both of whom were very confused at the sudden animosity between the two normally good friends. The last Harry saw of Neville, he was stalking angrily out the portrait hole, purposefully not looking his way. It left Harry feeling dreadfully empty aside from his furious mood.

However, remaining in his dorm was very stifling, and Harry finally rolled out and stalked down the stairs, his bag and transfiguration work slung over his shoulder. He crossed the common room and tried to ignore the sudden silence that spread from his appearance. He was out the portrait hole when he heard Ron shout at him to wait. Not wanting to talk, Harry broke into a run for the Transfiguration classroom. He wanted to talk to McGonagall about staying at the school over Christmas, not any of his classmates.

Upon his arrival at the hallway outside the Transfiguration classroom, Harry stopped dead. Lying in the hall before him was Justin Finch-Fletchey, and a black and smoky looking ghost. The scene seemed etched in livid detail before him, from Nick's half-decapitated head, to

the spiders scurrying from the scene. Harry jumped as badly as the rest of the school when Peeves behind him started screaming.

"Attack, attack! Another attack! No mortal or ghost is safe! Run for your lives! Attaack!"

Harry swore explosively, and would have run had the doors around him not slammed open immediately in response to the yelling. Everyone crowded out into the corridor, and chaos reigned, much to Peeves' enjoyment. Finally, McGonagall shot several loud bangs off from her wand and the students cleared out of her way. Peeves, foiled by the reestablishment of order, began to sing,

"Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh what have you done,

You're killing off students, you think it's good fun-

"That's enough, Peeves." McGonagall snapped. Peeves left, sticking his tongue out, and McGonagall turned her sharp glare to Harry's sullen form.

Getting the two victims out of the way was quickly delegated out and dealt with, Harry waiting silently by the wall, trying to control his fear. Finally, McGonagall addressed him once more.

"This way, Potter."

Harry silently followed in her wake. He felt like someone had poured lead into his shoes, but he made himself follow her all the way to a large stone gargoyle and past it onto a set of rising stairs. He knew where he was going. He'd seen it a few times, when his parents were called in to talk with Dumbledore: the Headmaster's office. His belly clenched painfully as he desperately hoped his parents wouldn't be brought in. He couldn't face them, not then. Not right then. Still, Harry followed and stood quietly in the office as McGonagall left him there. The instruments whirred and puffed, and Harry found himself keeping company with Fawkes, who was looking very ready for his next burning day. Quietly, Harry gave the bird a short nod before he glanced back down at his feet, trying not to think of the inevitable: his parents arriving.

A squawk from Fawkes was all the warning Harry had before he burst into flames. Harry jumped and stared as he turned into a fireball and became ash, and he was still staring when Dumbledore came in.

"Ah, I see he's come around now."

Harry nodded dully, glanced up at the Headmaster and looked away once more. Calmly the headmaster regarded him before sighing and rubbing his nose.

"I do not believe you are the one opening the Chamber, Harry. And I can reassure you that if there is the blood of Slytherin in you, it is so utterly weak there is no way to trace it, and it should have no power over you. Your parseltongue is a gift of random chance, and is nothing to be ashamed of."

Harry remained silent, refusing to let Dumbledore see that his words meant anything. The man was doing his 'omniscient' act again, covering his worries without them being voiced. It was thoughtful, but he was in too foul a mood to appreciate it.

"Technically, I should be contacting your parents, but since I do not believe anything drastically important has happened yet, I shall refrain. Your friend, Neville," Harry didn't miss the emphasis, "Informed me you would like to remain at the castle over Christmas break this year." Harry looked firmly up at him. However, he refused to meet his eyes. "Your little sister will be most disappointed if you do not return home, you know."

"With all due respect sir, I don't care right now. I'd like some time to myself to settle ... this." Harry made a disgusted gesture at the general area, and Dumbledore smiled comfortingly once more.

"I believe it can be arranged. Be sure to inform your parents by owl of your change of plans."

Harry nodded shortly, and left.

||||

The school was in a panic over the double attack of Nick and Justin. Several people were avoiding Harry like the plague now. The saving grace of it was Fred and George. Upon hearing of the preposterous rumours, they decided to play with them, preceding Harry through the corridors with pompous expressions, announcing,

“Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil second year coming through.”

The best part was when they informed Percy he needed to be going along to the Chamber of Secrets to enjoy tea and crumpets with his fanged servant. Going with his basilisk idea, Harry had to wonder how it managed to drink from the cup, much less lift the thing.

The biggest surprise for Harry that week was when Ron called out to Neville and clapped hands with him, thanking him for staying at the school. Harry finally broke the silence between him and Neville, which had now lasted several days.

“I thought you were going home.”

Neville looked at him sidelong and then returned to his schoolwork. “The deal I made was that if you stayed, I stayed. I’m not leaving you here alone, with only Slytherins and the Chessman for company.” Hermione shot him a glare and Neville added, “You’re already good company, ‘Mione. I don’t have to worry about him hanging out with you.”

Harry was then treated to the interesting sight of Ron staring with worry between Neville and Hermione. Harry bit his lip softly to keep from laughing. Apparently Ginny wasn’t the only Weasley with a crush.

When the holidays came, and it was only he, Neville, Hermione and the Weasleys in the tower, Harry had difficulty enjoying the silence. He’d sent his letter to his parents, informing them of his decision to remain at the school, but a reply had not yet come. Harry feared it would be arriving shortly, and, as he’d feared, it came the first morning of Winter break. The family’s large barn owl, Stag, dropped a

vivid red letter on Harry's plate and Ron stopped asking why Harry didn't have an appetite. Once opened, James' voice rang across the hall.

"Harry James Potter, I would make it known I'm very disappointed in you. You're not owning up to what's happening in your own life and you're now hiding out at school as though ashamed of yourself. You should know very well there is nothing that will get between our family, so stop being an utter fool! I'm letting it go this time, but don't try this again."

Harry swallowed hard and ran from the room in tears. Neville glared at the remaining parchment and sighed, turning back to his own meal. Meanwhile, Harry was running up the stairs and making his way out to the top of the Astronomy tower. He always liked heights, and being up in the open air made his head feel several times clearer. Not five minutes later, Hedwig found him bearing a letter from his mother. Dreading what might be within, Harry opened it with shaking fingers.

Dear Harry,

I will kindly inform you that your father is now nursing a headache from the chewing out he recently received. I will also make it known I am disappointed in your choice to remain at school as well, but that I will respect it. But please remember, Harry: we are your family, and won't leave you alone for any reason. It was startling, to say the least, to hear you were a parseltongue. Your father was most certainly shocked, and, I'll admit, angry at the turn of events. He has calmed down now.

Harry sniffed and smiled weakly. When his dad was angry and shocked, it was usually several times worse. However, when his mother ended that with 'he's calmed down now' it usually meant she pulled him back down rather forcefully.

Your godfather is also calm now. You know yourself the reputation surrounding parseltongues, and it is something to try and move past. However, clearly, you are no different than you were before. It was always there, Harry, and it always will be. You are not what you are; you are who you are. Remember that, and act accordingly.

Nanna is most upset at not being able to see her older brother, but I have explained that you had reasons to remain, and will be sure to send along her present. I do hope you bought them, yes? We wouldn't want you to think this is an excuse to get out of it. (I tease, child) Your presents will be sent in time to arrive, and I hope you enjoy them. Please think of us while you're away, and be sure to come visit next break, alright?

Much love,

Your mother, Lily

Harry rubbed his eyes clear, and tucked the letter into his pocket. He knew his family would react like that. His dad would freak out, and his godfather, and then his mother would calm down and bring the others with her. It still didn't make it much easier to take, though, especially when his dad sent him a howler. Likely that had been his second one, the first remaining unsent. Harry didn't want to think of that, though, and so he left the Astronomy tower and found his way into the library. In the far back corner that was his and Prince's, Harry found Prince already ensconced there. He gave him a weak smile.

"Do you ever do anything else?"

Prince looked up at him, and smiled wryly. "On occasion. I fly, I brew potions, do homework, talk to Blaise, talk to Snape ... but I like reading. You alright?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm fine. My dad's just a little ..."

"Light. He's very light, and parseltongue is dark. You knew he'd react like that."

"He always does." Harry glared at the table, and pouted.

"He came around though, yes? You are his son."

"He came 'round," Harry admitted, "but he bloody well shouldn't have had to 'come around', I'm his goddamned son. Would he think I

became a parselmouth and half-Slytherin just to spite him? I am who I bloody am.” Harry snarled.

Prince watched, and then merely shrugged. “But you value his opinion, and you fear losing it.”

Harry paled and stared at him. “How … Why …”

“You learn to spot these things in time, Potter.” Prince drawled. He looked up and shot him a wry grin. “It’s part of being Slytherin.”

Harry felt a similar rebellion to what had drove him off before rise, but he suppressed it and fixed Prince with a firm stare. “Teach me.” Harry asked.

Prince put down his book and frowned at him. “What?”

“Teach me. To read emotions; to control my own. If you’re so bloody smart, you can do that, right?” Harry watched Prince scowl some and pulled back. “Please?”

Prince blinked, and then looked at him cockeyed. “And what do I get?”

“What do you want?” Harry returned.

“What can you give?” Prince met.

Harry stopped and stared. This was a Slytherin he was working with. They never did anything for no reason, and Prince was clearly no different. But what could he, himself offer? He didn’t have much, and what would a kid want from another kid. No, what would a Slytherin want from a Gryffindor …

“Information. Anything I can look up.”

Prince sneered. “I’m not cheating on tests.”

“And I’m not talking academics.” Harry returned.

Prince looked impressed. "Good to know. It's a deal." He extended his hand across the table and smiled. It looked predatory, but Harry only paused a moment before he took it, a smile of his own on his face. Two could play that game. It takes one predator to meet another, and he was certain he was up to the challenge.

||||

Christmas came, as it was wont. Harry woke that morning feeling a prick of sadness at not being home, but he brushed it off. He'd already sent his presents to his family, and a short apology, and he smiled brightly when he saw the pile gathered at the end of his bed. Ron wasn't awake yet, but Harry opened his gifts anyways. Hermione had gotten him a luxury, eagle-feather quill, Ron a book on Chess, Mrs. Weasley had sent what he thought was her usual gift: a knitted sweater, and food, and Hagrid had given him a tin of treacle fudge that got a spot right by the fire to soften. Neville had given him new boots; Remus had bought him a large box of chocolate, Sirius a wand holster for his forearm, and Frank and Alice had together bought him a book on magical snakes. Harry felt his face heat at that, and he quickly put it aside before pulling over his present from his parents. It was a large, soft package, with a letter taped to the top in his dad's handwriting. Harry pulled it open first.

Dear Harry,

I'm sorry about the howler, but it was very frustrating to have you avoid coming home like you did. I'm not that angry, son. It was shocking more than anything to have you be a parseltongue. I never expected it, and, yes, it was slightly frightening. The talent is not well-known, but you are still my son. I don't expect you'll start acting like a Dark wizard just because you have a talent with that history.

I hope you'll appreciate what your mother and I got you. The robe is going to be a little big for you, but I doubt you'll need to wear it to any sort of gathering in the near future, as twelve is not the age for social functions. However, once you're older it should be a good fit and I hope you will appreciate it. The pendant, however, is directly from me. I hope you like it.

Love,

Your father, James

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat and tore into the gift. It was indeed a robe, but Harry could only stare as he lifted it up, catching the small pendant that fell off the top. Harry set the necklace aside in order to appreciate the robes first. They were indeed much larger than he needed them, but he expected that he'd be able to wear them soon enough. The robes appeared as basic black, but along the outer edges was a dark brown trim, and across the back were dark brown stripes. Harry felt his mouth twitch with amusement. The pattern made him think of an adder's stripes. Around the collar, however, was tiny, nigh invisible green embroidery. Harry could just hear the argument his mother must have made.

'The colour will bring out his eyes. Stop being so against Slytherin!'

Harry's smile faltered, and he gently folded his new robes to place on his bed. He picked up the pendant, and froze. Dangling from the end of a long, gold, rope-like chain was a pewter serpent with gold bands across its back. Small emeralds glinted in its eyes, as it stared out from a complicated coil. It was large for a pendent, but Harry found himself entranced by the beauty, and what it meant to him. His father had gotten him this. His Slytherin-hating father had gotten his son a serpent pendant. Harry gently rubbed his eyes and swallowed before he slid the long necklace over his head and gently cleaned up the paper he'd strewn about. As he did so, he found a small parcel he'd overlooked, with his name scrawled across a small tag. A smile tugged Harry's mouth up. He'd forgotten Nanna's present.

Harry sat back down and pulled it open, hoping she'd like his gift of a small box of sugarquills and one of the photos Colin had taken of Harry and his friends in the common room when they weren't paying attention, one of few Harry actually liked. The package revealed a short note, "Don't you stay at Hogwarts again without me, Harry! I'm forgiving you this time. Nanna Potter", and a Christmas coloured scarf of alternating red and green. Harry laughed once more. His worry was blessedly gone. His dad had accepted it, Nanna was still antsy, and he still had a home.

Ron blearily sat up and rubbed his eyes. "What'choo laughing at, Harry?"

"Nothing Ron." Harry finished. "But you still have a pile of presents to dig through, though."

Ron was out of bed in moments, completely distracted. Harry smiled faintly. He wasn't too surprised Ron was one to get completely into his present opening. He only hoped Ron appreciated the thought that went into Harry getting him the book on Potions theory. When he heard Ron yelp his name, Harry laughed.

||||

Christmas break ended with Harry in a far better mood than he'd been in when it began. Having spent the holiday in Gryffindor tower with the Weasley twins, Neville, and Ron, the holiday had most certainly been eventful in short spurts. Best thing of it in Harry's mind was that Lockhart had been out the whole holiday and he'd been spared the man's ego. While he'd let up some on trying to get Harry to be chummy with him, he certainly hadn't stopped, and the library seemed the only place to deter him. Prince had offered that it might have been because he was afraid of knowledge. The logic seemed almost reasonable, considering.

It was the general reaction to Harry's pendant that was most interesting, however. Hermione had been the first to notice it, and she naturally asked to see it and whom it was from. Harry refused to take it off, and didn't answer her on who gave it. He gave Neville a pointed look, though, and the other boy smiled brightly, and told Hermione that it meant a lot to Harry. This, of course, put her in a pout for a few minutes, until Neville asked her what she thought of the Encyclopaedia of spells he and Harry had given her. Hermione bubbled over in happiness.

The second person to notice was Prince, who glanced it at, and asked about it very idly. Harry had, strangely enough, told him flat out it was from his father and Prince gave him a second, longer look

before nodding shortly. Somehow Harry knew he'd understand. Nothing more was said on the matter, other than that it was very nice.

||||

The bustle of students refilled the hallways as the Hogwarts Express brought everyone back. Students were slightly calmer since there hadn't been another attack, and the whole matter seemed almost swept under the rug in the meantime. Lockhart went back to his old tricks, Hermione shot him down, Snape was still unpleasant to Harry, and at one point Harry spotted Prince slipping something into Lockhart's handbag. Shortly thereafter, when Lockhart reached inside, he screamed like a girl and dropped the bag. Out of it slid an adder, hissing irritably, and Harry had to bite his lip as he heard the sort of language it was using. It was shortly thereafter that Harry noticed Lockhart had begun to turn colours. Harry had made sure no one saw him leave the scene, and he found his way to the library to congratulate Prince. The boy waved it off, and Harry finally asked what he'd done to make Lockhart turn colours. He finally gave him.

"Fed it a potion. So, Lockhart's poisoned normally, and he's going to remain colourful. Anyone try and blame you?"

Harry shrugged. "Left too soon. And besides, everyone knows I can't brew potions worth beans, supposedly."

Prince gave him a long look. "You haven't yet made a potion properly in class, you know. Except maybe at the end of last year."

"Not a lot of kids can do something right if they're being glared at every moment they're working, Prince." Harry snarled. "I can brew fine at home."

Prince's mouth twitched. "So you're saying you could've done the same thing I did? Made Lockhart get on the bad side of an adder with a colour potion on its teeth?"

"Could've." Harry allowed. "But you were the one who did it. I saw you put the snake in his purse."

Prince looked up at Harry in surprise, and then smiled cautiously. "No self-respecting man should have a purse anyways."

Harry smiled and sat down, pulling over one of the charms books Prince had near him and began to read.

||||

A few days later, Ron ran into the dorm and yelled for Harry and Neville. Both of them came running, worried something had happened to their friend. Instead, they found him holding Ginny's arm and looking at her in concern. Harry walked over cautiously. Ginny had not gotten over her crush from the beginning of the year, and she had been very quiet the entire time. She was behaving drastically different than normal, and apparently Ron was growing concerned. He looked over at Harry and Neville with a worried expression. Several others watched curiously.

"Harry, Neville, I think we should take Ginny to Madam Pomfrey." He beckoned them closer, and Ginny tried to pull away. Ron held on, and then pulled a diary out of his pocket. "She said something about this diary talking at her. I don't know what it could've done, but it's worrying me. Maybe it enchanted her, or something. I don't know how it works, and she's not telling me."

"Ron," Neville began. "You could've handled this better." Neville quickly broke Ron's grip on Ginny, and then slipped his arm over her shoulder and nodded to Harry. Harry grabbed the diary and slipped out the portrait hole after Neville, Ron trailing behind. Neville led them to an empty classroom and then looked at Ginny once more. Harry stood behind him, Ron behind him, and waited.

"Ginny, what's this about the diary?"

Ginny bit her lip and looked frantically between them in concern. "I – I found it among my things after we went to Diagon Alley earlier this year, and –and I thought mum had gotten it for me. I wrote in it, and – and ..." Ginny's eyes looked faintly glassy, and she started to cry. "I can't remember! I can't remember what happened. I know I've written

in it, but there isn't anything there anymore! I don't want to see it anymore, I'm scared!"

Neville looked at Harry with a stricken expression, and Harry quickly thumbed through the pages. All of them were blank. He tilted it and showed it to Neville, who looked just as confused.

"Ginny, you're sure you wrote in this? Ron said you said it wrote back
..."

"I don't remember!" Ginny wailed. "Please, please! I think something terrible is going on with it, but I don't know!"

"We should really take this to McGonagall ..." Harry muttered. Ginny whipped around to look at him and grabbed his arm.

"Don't take this to a teacher! Please don't! I don't want to get in trouble!"

Harry blinked, and then closed his mouth slowly. "Ginny, if this is enchanted we should have them look at it, and you. It might've affected you funny."

"Please don't bring the teachers into it! I'm not going to write in it again, I swear! Just don't ... Please, Harry, please." Ginny fell to the ground and started to cry at Harry's feet. Harry looked between Neville and Ron, meeting their equally bewildered stares before he settled and dropped to his knees.

"Ginny, I won't mention the diary, alright?" Ginny eyed him warily, and Harry raised his hands. "I promise, I won't. But will you please go to Pomfrey and have her look you over? Just to make sure you're okay. You don't have to say anything; just have Ron drag you up there like the overprotective brother he is and let her look you over and maybe get a calming draught. Will you do that?"

Ginny nodded weakly, and she stood, eyeing the diary like it was a viper. Harry watched her look and tucked it against his side. "I'll keep this myself. You won't have to see it. Do you want me to burn it or something?"

Ginny shrugged, but she'd tensed once more, and Harry nodded to Ron. Ron led Ginny out with a grateful look to Harry and Neville, and once he was gone, Harry turned to look at the other. Neville's expression was a darkly suspicious as his own.

"She wrote in it, but the writings gone. And she told Ron it was writing back."

"You think it's dangerous?" Harry asked, looking at the diary as though he thought it might bite as well.

Neville bristled and hissed. "I don't know. Don't write in it until you're more sure. Maybe let it sit, or something? You could hand it in and leave Ginny's name out, you know."

Harry eyed the diary in his hand and then sighs. "No, I'll hold onto it for the moment. I'm curious."

Neville eyed him carefully. "I'll bet Ginny was too."

A/N: I have finished the vacation, and was quite happy to return to see so many people attending my story. Thank you, all of you. I will return to the every two weeks for updates, from either Tues or Thurs, not sure which (feel free to express an opinion). In case I don't find a place to make this clear about the story, Harry is not the Boy-Who-Lived. There is no such title in this universe; Voldemort disappeared for no apparent reason from the public eye and the Death Eaters disbanded. The prophecy, however, is valid and has been partially fulfilled as it should be for the story. Hopefully further reading will make this clear.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Ten

Harry had always liked Valentine's Day for the ridiculous attitude the older students would acquire on that day. However, his amusement died horribly when he opened the door to the Great Hall and found the walls to be covered in lurid pink flowers. He gaped, and then weakly asked Neville behind him, "Please tell me I opened the wrong door."

Neville didn't answer, but instead paused, before he ducked his head and pushed Harry through. "Sooner we eat, sooner we can get away from all this."

"But why don't we visit the kitchens ..." Harry whimpered.

"You want to be blindsided by whatever other torture he can come up with? I'll bet this ain't the worst of it that bozo's got planned." Neville grumped. He pushed Harry into his seat and took the place next to him. "Honestly, I'll bet the heir stopped just to spare his creature the shame of Lockhart trying to claim he killed the bloody thing."

Harry laughed weakly, and then quickly banished the confetti off the food he wanted. He glanced up at the teacher's table and looked back down with a shudder. Lockhart was positively hideous in pink. Harry didn't look up even though he knew Lockhart had stood.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockhart shouted. "And may I thank the forty-five people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging a surprise for you all and it doesn't end here!"

Harry thumped his head onto the table and muttered words under his breath he wouldn't have dared speak near his mother. Lockhart clapped, and the doors opened once more. Harry looked up out of morbid curiosity, and felt Neville bury his head against his back. Harry tried to shrug him off, but it was half-hearted at best as he stared in horror at the surly-looking dwarfs dressed in little wings with harps.

"My friendly card-carrying cupids!" Beamed Lockhart. Harry wished one of them would strangle the man already. They looked angry enough. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your

Valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here." Neville smacked his head against Harry's back once more. "I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion. Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a love potion? And while you're ..."

"Because they're unethical?" Harry muttered.

"And he'd feed you poison." Ron added dismally. "If only he'd poison Lockhart."

"Did he just say Flitwick knows entrancing enchantments?" Neville asked. "Good grief. Snape does look likely to feed someone poison. If only ..." Neville looked skyward, and then winced at the confetti before returning to his meal.

Ron then looked over at Hermione, and asked, "Please tell me you weren't one of the forty-five."

Hermione snorted, "As if! That fool. He's arrogant and spiteful and completely fake."

The dwarfs barged into classes all day long, much to the teacher's annoyance, and late that afternoon one of them set its sights on Harry. In front of a long line of first years, between classes, Harry heard his name come up, and immediately barged through to get away. The little creature, however, barked shins and elbowed through the crowd faster than Harry, and caught up with him.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person." The dwarf growled, and twanged its harp. Harry furiously tried to keep running, but the dwarf grabbed his bag to keep him back. Harry pulled for several moments, and then just let go. The dwarf tumbled head over heels, and Harry heard, to his dismay, something break inside. Terrified at the thought of his books soaking up ink, Harry leapt back to claim his bag, and furiously focused on saving his books, ignoring the irate dwarf who strung up his harp and determined to deliver the Valentine, whether Harry was paying attention or not.

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he was mine, he's really divine,

The hero of my little world."

Harry felt himself go as scarlet as his ink, and continued emptying his bag with care. Fortunately, his snake book had been on the top, but at the bottom with his ink bottle were the Lockhart books, and the diary. The Lockhart books certainly weren't a loss, but Harry stared for several moments at the diary. There wasn't a drop of ink on it. So distracted was he, that Malfoy came upon him and snatched the diary out of his hands before he could react.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" Malfoy drawled. He apparently thought he had Harry's own diary, and waved it about rather carelessly. Harry hadn't before realized how much of a crowd he's gotten during the dwarf's serenade, but now he saw Malfoy and his goons and a large crowd of other students in addition to the first years. Harry also saw Ginny looked absolutely white, and that sealed it for him. Quickly cleaning his bag of the ink, Harry thrust his books back inside and stood, glaring at Malfoy. Just as Malfoy was about to make another comment someone behind him snagged the book out of his grasp and tossed it to Harry. Malfoy and Harry both looked, and found themselves faced with Zabini. Zabini carelessly yawned with obvious dramatics.

"The bell rang five minutes ago. You're holding up traffic with your little spat."

Harry hadn't thought Zabini could sound so cold, but he froze Malfoy where he stood. Harry, however, remembered that Prince hung out with him, and spared him no emotion as he turned and left. Once again, his mind drifted to the diary and it's apparently immunity to the ink, even as his feet led him promptly to his next class.

||||

That evening, Harry tucked himself into the dormitory on the half-true excuse that he couldn't stand hearing one more line of that awful

Valentine. However, he was more concerned with figuring out the diary Ginny had had. Harry fingered his two necklaces nervously as he sat, the diary open on his knees and his quill in his other hand. One necklace was his new one, from his father. The other was a replacement for the necklace that had broken last year, in the room with the Philosopher's stone, one that alerted his parents if his life was ever immediately threatened. Having it break last year had been horrible. If he had to go through another this year, he didn't know what to think. Dumbledore would likely get himself a howler in person from Lily, after she was through with Harry for stepping into the danger in the first place.

Harry shook the thoughts out and looked back down at the diary. He dipped his quill and dropped a spot onto the page. It glistened, and then sank into the paper. Frowning, Harry touched the quill down and drew a circle, and then sketched petals around it to make a flower. As soon as he finished pulled the quill away for more than a moment, it, too, sank into the paper. He found no reaction, and finally, hesitantly, he wrote onto the page, 'My name is James.'

He definitely wasn't going to write his real name to some enchanted book, no. The words remained a time, and then faded. However, shortly thereafter, letters drew themselves onto the page in his ink, words he hadn't written.

'Hello, James, My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?'

Harry stared a long time at the diary, even as the words faded back into the paper. Books were not supposed to talk back, and Harry was immediately on his guard. He was very, very glad he hadn't written his name down, and finally, after a time, he wrote back.

'It came into my hands from someone who didn't understand it.'

'That's a fair shame. I only want to help. There are things in here that might be a tad confusing, though. Things some people don't want known.'

'What might people not want known? Information is never evil.' Harry definitely didn't trust this diary, but he was also very curious. Did the diary remember Ginny? Did it think? And if so, what else could it do?

The writing returned, 'This diary holds memories of terrible things. Things which were covered up, which happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

Harry frowned. 'What kind of terrible do you mean?'

'There were attacks at the school upon the students. The Chamber of Secrets was found and opened, and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the perpetrator, and he was expelled, but the headmaster didn't want it known that the Chamber was real. The girl was said to have died in an accident, and the one who opened the Chamber was never imprisoned.'

Harry froze in place and stared. He'd presumed it had happened before, but ... 'It's been opened again, the Chamber has. Who was it last time? What is the monster?'

'I can show you, if you like. My memory of the night I caught him. You won't have to take my word for it; you can see for yourself.'

Harry nervously chewed his lip as he fingered his snake necklace. 'Like a penseive?' He asked.

'Exactly like.'

Harry nervously brought his free hand up and nibbled his nails. He knew all about penseives; his mother had one and she'd used it before to show him some fun memories. He knew how to get in, and get out. He could back out, then, if he wanted to, from the memory. Harry sighed. If all else failed, he'd have to be fished out. Did he want to know bad enough to take this chance?

'I'd rather not.' Harry wrote. 'But I would like to know who. Surely you have his name, and at least a description of the creature.'

There was a longer pause than before, and then the writing came. ‘All right. The one who opened the Chamber was a Rubeus Hagrid. The monster was a giant spider, an acromantula. He was the kind of boy who thought all animals were good, and sweet. But he’d let it out when he shouldn’t have, so the trouble arose.’

Harry blinked. Somehow that made a disturbing kind of sense if he ignored the fact that acromantula couldn’t petrify. Maybe it was just a similar situation? ‘Thank you, Riddle. I think I need to check this out. I fear it might be happening just the same as before.’

‘Glad to have helped, James. Good luck.’

The ink faded, and Harry closed the diary, feeling strangely spent. He tossed it down to the bottom of the trunk, and closed it tightly. Once closed, he leaned on the lid and scowled at his bed. Riddle must have either been wrong, or the attacks had been different. However, he now knew Hagrid must know something about the attacks himself, and Hagrid couldn’t keep a secret. When Neville and Ron came back up the stairs, Harry turned to them firmly.

“We have to talk to Hagrid.”

||||

Convincing the others to ask Hagrid was a bit of a chore, but after a little cajoling, and a promise to find a way to make it up to him, the others followed him down the next weekend, and they knocked on the door and went in. Harry, by general consensus, was the one who would have to ask the question. It was his idea, after all.

“Hagrid ...” Harry hesitated, and then swallowed. Okay, maybe blunt would work best. “You remember the attacks of fifty years ago. What do you know of them?”

Hagrid nearly broke a glass he jerked so hard, and he levelled a surprisingly nasty glare at Harry. Harry met his eyes calmly and returned, “I know it wasn’t you who opened the Chamber; acromantula can’t petrify. I found this diary that is enchanted; it was Tom Riddle’s. He said you were the one, with an acromantula. He

was wrong, clearly, but I want to know what you remember of that time. I – I want to make this all cleared up, and the sooner the better.”

Hagrid stared at Harry for a long moment, and deflated. “I don’t like talking ‘bout it.” He grumbled.

“So you’re keeping quiet?” Neville snapped.

“I told Dumbledore everythin’ I knew, of course!” He blustered. “I don’t see why you need to know.”

“Well is there anyone else we can ask?” Neville shot.

Harry gave Neville a long look, and then turned back to Hagrid. “What happened? Were the students petrified as they are now? And who died, and how?”

Hagrid rubbed his face carefully and sighed. “I don’t know why you’re so ruddy stubborn … just like your parents.” Harry stiffened, and forced himself to relax. “It was all pretty similar. No notes, just students dropping stiff everywhere. Finally a girl died towards the end of the year, and Headmaster Dippet started talking of closing the school. I don’t know how Riddle found out ‘bout Aragog, but he came upon me and turned me in for it. Nobody believed me; I was always about with the creatures, and Riddle … he was a prefect, good grades, upstanding student who almost all the teachers liked. I don’t know why he did that …”

Harry sighed. “I suppose. Anything else?”

Hagrid rubbed his hand over his face, and shook his shaggy head. “Nothing, really. Only student who might know more was little Myrtle.” At their confused looks Hagrid sighed again. “She was the girl who died. Sweet thing, she was.”

Harry gently placed his hand on Hagrid’s arm, “I’m sorry we asked, Hagrid.”

“Tis alright, you know.” Hagrid sighed. “I just … don’t like remembering it.”

Harry nodded once more, and looked to the others in concern. They didn't have to stare back at him like it was all his fault, though! How do you cheer up someone after a question like that? Harry didn't know, and settled for patting Hagrid on the arm in a hopefully comforting manner as Neville, Hermione and Ron shifted uncomfortably.

||||

Easter holidays came and the decision about what subjects to take was upon them. Harry leaned back and glared at the subjects in question.

"I am not taking Divination, Ron." Harry repeated. "I have had enough of the insubstantial this year, and have no interest in learning it either. Care of Magical Creatures and Arithmancy are all I intend to work with, thank you very much."

Neville nodded and marked down both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes for himself, passing up Care of Magical Creatures and Divination entirely. Ron looked between them rather helplessly, before he sighed and wrote himself in for Divination and Care anyways. "What are you taking Hermione?"

"Everything." She announced. Harry gave her a sidelong look, and Neville queried,

"Everything? No offence, but ... how? I don't think you'd like Divination anyways. And why are you considering Muggle Studies? Your parents are muggles! Wouldn't it make sense to just leave those alone?"

Hermione slammed her notebook shut and glared at him. "Well, pardon me. I think I'll be taking care of my work as I want to, whether you have an opinion or not. It's my choice." She stood and stormed off, and Neville looked over at Harry and shrugged.

"Maybe she's PMSing?"

Harry snorted and Ron gaped. "That was couth, Neville." Harry added. Neville shrugged, and looked his way.

"I thought you were mildly interested in Divination?" Neville asked.
"Why'd you choose not to take it?"

Harry shrugged, and glanced around the common room. Seeing no one nearby, Harry leaned over to Neville, "After finding a diary enchanted to talk back, I want to stick with stuff I can see right under my nose. If I get really curious, I can ask my mum to teach me. She knows the basics I'd need, and she probably will teach better than anyone else anyways."

"You haven't written in that diary again, have you?" Neville asked, worried. Both of them heard a gasp from behind their chairs, and several students across the room yelped, one shouting, 'Watch it!' Neville and Harry looked up in time to see robes whip up the girl's staircase. Harry's eyes were narrowed and tight, and Neville worried his lip. Ron sighed.

"That was probably Ginny."

Harry nodded slowly, and glanced up the stairs. Ginny's attitude had not improved even since she'd handed over the diary. Indeed, she seemed even more anxious and distracted than before, and she was regularly sending him nervous, or even frightened glances. Harry didn't understand it.

"You should destroy it." Neville added. "Burn it, or hand it over to a teacher. They're more likely to be able to disenchant it than you are, and maybe they could use the information it has. You can find out why it lied to you, or why Riddle thought Hagrid was at fault."

Harry hummed noncommittally. Neville shook his head once more and bent to make a few more marks on the paper, muttering under his breath.

||||

Quidditch practices continued, and Gryffindor's next match was against Hufflepuff. Practices had been as gruelling as usual, and the night before the match, Harry returned to find his dorm pulled apart, his trunk's contents strewn about the room. Harry paled, and quickly, he, Neville and Ron began to put it back together. A glance inside settled Harry's immediate worry about his nice robes, which were still settled neatly on the bottom, but that only highlighted that the diary wasn't inside. Once everything was gathered, his Lockhart books in even more disarray than they had managed to be before, it was undeniable.

"The diary is gone." Harry whispered to Neville. Neville paled. "And someone from Gryffindor stole it."

"Ginny?" Neville asked, his eyes flicking to Ron.

"It doesn't seem like her, to drag everything about like that, though."

"Harry, she hasn't been herself all year." Neville returned. "She's not been herself since we saw her on the train."

"I thought it was a crush. She was really shy around me."

"And her shyness around me?"

"You're my best friend, Neville."

Neville shook his head. "I don't like this. We should tell a teacher."

Harry immediately vetoed it. "How about we ask Hermione to approach Ginny about it? If she doesn't get anything, we'll ... continue after the match."

Neville looked at him for a long moment, and then sighed. "Alright. I doubt ... much will happen in the meantime."

Harry smiled wanly. "Thanks."

Neville's look, however, told him he still wasn't comfortable with it.

||||

The next day was, to quote Wood, ‘perfect Quidditch weather’. It was brilliantly sunny, and a light breeze lifted the leaves outside. Harry laughed and enjoyed the morning, sitting calm and relaxed at the table, trying not to think about Hermione’s report of the night before. She had spoken to Ginny, and Ginny had immediately spooked, and then broken down crying at the mention of the diary. Neville was now shooting glares at Harry from farther down the table. Harry had once more insisted they wait before reporting the problem with the diary, and now Neville was once more not talking to him. But not talking didn’t make his glares lessen any.

Neville did trail him, Ron, and Hermione, though, as they left to fetch his Quidditch things. Neville walked straight into his back when he stopped dead, hearing a voice drift sibilantly through the walls.

‘Kill this time … let me rip … tear …’

“What the bloody Hell?” Harry spat. He stared at the wall beside him in shock, and Neville spoke first.

“What?”

“I just … you didn’t hear that? No voice, nothing?”

Neville watched him carefully and shook his head. “I heard nothing. Ron? Hermione?” Both of them shook their heads, and Hermione gently tapped her lip.

“Harry, are you sure you heard it?”

“Yes!” Harry insisted. “It was as clear … well, it was kinda muffled, like it was moving through the wall … it was really low, too, slurred ...”

Hermione tapped his lip once more, and then gained a determined set to her face. “You go on, I’m going to the library.”

"Hermione, you'll miss the match and you shouldn't go alone!" Neville yelled after her. He turned and sighed. "Harry, just get on the pitch already. I'll go make sure she remains safe."

Ron grabbed Neville's shoulder. "I'll go. You go with Harry." He didn't wait for an argument and ran after Hermione, yelling at her to wait up. Neville watched him go, and looked back at Harry with amusement. Once they looked at each other, though, Neville's face became set in an angry mask, and he stormed off in front of Harry.

Harry sighed. Neville was still angry with him, then. Harry wasn't so sure he blamed him, either.

The teams were done warming up, and the match promised to be excellent, but Harry saw McGonagall with a large purple megaphone before she was fully on the pitch. His heart dropped, and he was seized with fear. He didn't listen as she announced the match was cancelled, and instead looked among the Gryffindor stands. He found Neville, and to his horror, Neville was looking as frantically as he was. They seemed to conclude the same thing at once: Ron and Hermione were still absent. Harry ran over to McGonagall as she finished ordering Wood off to the common room. McGonagall saw him coming, and seemed to deflate. Harry tried to breath clearly, but found it difficult, and he followed her in painful silence. Neville caught up in short order, and placed his hand lightly on Harry's shoulder in support as they were led into the castle and up the stairs.

"This will be a bit of a shock." McGonagall began, but Neville cut her off.

"It was Ron and Hermione, wasn't it?" He asked, his voice dead. McGonagall looked at him and he shrugged. "They'd gone together to the library. They weren't back at the match when you came out. You called me and Harry over, their best friends. I can see why you didn't want Fred and George and them first. And we do need to talk to you once we get up there." Neville's look to Harry left it indubitable what they were going to discuss.

Inside the hospital wing, Hermione and Ron were on beds next to one another, their expressions open, glassy, and shocked. McGonagall picked up a small circular mirror from the table between them.

"I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them."

Neville looked at it several moments, and Harry shrugged helplessly. He was feeling very cold right then, and desperately wishing he could be anywhere else. Neville turned to him, and then directed him into a chair before he pulled McGonagall farther away and began to talk to her in a hurried voice.

"McGonagall, a while ago, Ginny came to me, Harry and Ron with worries about a diary she'd found among her things. Apparently it was enchanted to respond back when she wrote in it, but when me and Harry asked her she said she couldn't remember what happened when she wrote in it. It was also completely empty. Later on, Harry found out it absorbed ink through an accident, and wrote in it. A boy named 'Tom Riddle' wrote back, and offered to let him view a memory as though it was a pensieve. Harry refused, and Riddle said he knew about the Chamber of Secrets. His information was wrong, but still ... a diary that writes back is worrisome, and I don't like it. I wanted to hand it in immediately, but Harry made me wait."

Harry glanced up and found McGonagall looking pale. She carefully asked, "I believe handing that diary in would be a very wise choice. Where is it?"

Neville flinched. "Well, you see ... Harry's trunk got broken into last night and ransacked. The diary was taken. It had to have been someone from Gryffindor; no one else should know the password. We half thought it might be Ginny, but we don't know. Sorry." Neville quietly scuffed his foot on the floor, and McGonagall pinched her nose with a tense expression.

"I see. We'll glance through her things, then, once I take you up there. Follow me, please."

McGonagall left, Neville tailing her eagerly. They were at the door before they noticed Harry hadn't followed. McGonagall looked over at him where he sat, staring absently at Hermione's frozen hand, and she walked slowly back over, placing her hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry looked slowly up at her.

"Mr. Potter ... Harry, you may remain here for the moment. Please check with Percy about the new rules when you return to the tower. I'll give you time to calm down, then."

Harry nodded dully. He didn't notice when McGonagall shut the door, and didn't react for a long time. Hermione and Ron were petrified. First year, someone apparently kept attacking a student and Dumbledore did nothing. Prince had unintentionally let that slip in one of the times they talked, that Quirrel had attacked him several times. Then, Harry and his friends found out far more than they should have about the Philosopher's Stone and then easily passed traps that should have stopped far older and more skilled wizards. Finally, that summer, some parents tore clean into Dumbledore about him trying to use their nephew. Harry felt like his world was crumbling around him. Dumbledore was supposed to be powerful, and capable of taking care of all of them. Now, he was allowing this mess with the Chamber to occur and he was doing nothing. Why didn't he just drag that Tom Riddle in once more? He had to have known something; the attacks must have stopped. But clearly he implicated the wrong person. Unless the students weren't petrified – but Hagrid had confirmed that! – clearly someone wasn't telling the truth. It couldn't have been an acromantula. What was he missing?

Harry couldn't find an answer, and finally stood. Stroking a hand down Hermione's still arm and Ron's leg in turn, Harry walked firmly out of the hospital wing and turned to go to Gryffindor tower. The first door he passed was half open, and as he walked by, someone grabbed his arm firmly and pressed a hand against his mouth. Harry wrenched away and spun, stopping when he recognized the one who had grabbed him.

"Prince! What do you think you're doing?" Harry hissed.

Prince dragged him into the room with a firm glower, and pulled the door half-shut. It only worked because Harry wasn't fighting him; Prince was still much smaller than him.

"I needed to find you. Have you heard any inexplicable voices in the hallways lately? Any at all, with no apparent source?"

Harry stared at Prince for several long moments before nodding. "It was talking about killing."

Prince ran his fingers through his hair and muttered under his breath. He turned his dark eyes back on Harry with a fierce look. "I heard it today, just after the match was cancelled, on my way downstairs. I'm almost dead certain it was parseltongue, a snake. Blaise didn't hear it at all."

"Neither did Ron, Neville, or Hermione." Harry whispered. "Only us. Parselmouths. Hermione ran off to the library right after that. That's why she was caught."

Prince whipped his head around to face Harry, and mouthed something Harry was sure was uncouth. "Hermione was petrified?"

"Ron as well." Harry added.

Prince began to shift uneasily before he gave up and began to pace. "So we're hearing a snake inside the walls. Only we are hearing it. People are being petrified. What snakes can petrify?"

"Only basilisks." Harry returned. Prince eyed him. "I've checked every book I know. The only other thing that can petrify are Gorgons, and they wouldn't be speaking such coherent parseltongue, only their hair would."

Prince nodded slowly. "So the monster's a basilisk. Shouldn't be too surprised, this is Slytherin's room. So, all I know is that it's not happening from Slytherin. I've checked, Snape has checked. All students are accounted for at the times before, after, and during the attacks." Prince noticed Harry's awed stare and grimaced. "We're not trusted. Snape is expected to keep a careful watch, and Dumbledore

wants regular reports. Whoever is opening the Chamber, they are from one of the other houses.”

Harry stared long and hard at him, and whistled through his teeth. “Ouch.”

Prince nodded, and slowed his pacing. “You like sticking your neck out. Have you found out anything about this?”

Harry nodded slowly. “I came to the basilisk conclusion, and we’ve taken a bit of a look around. Most substantial thing, though, was this diary. It’s fifty years old, and the boy remembered the last time the Chamber opened. His memories are in there, I think. Something almost like a penseive. He was the one who caught out Hagrid and made them expel him on the charge, but it wasn’t Hagrid letting out the creature. Hagrid was in possession of an acromantula, not a basilisk. Acromantula do not petrify, so Tom Riddle was wrong.”

“You said it was a diary? You trusted an enchanted object?”

Harry scowled at Prince’s scepticism. “I didn’t trust it, but I wanted to know what it did. I didn’t give it my name or any information about myself. Just a fake name and a short thought about our situation.”

Prince slowly nodded. “Fine. Anything else?” Harry shook his head. “Nothing else at all?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “The girl who died was named Myrtle.”

Prince rolled his eyes in turn. “Fine, then. Lets hope everything gets cleared up soon. We’ll be missed if we’re not back shortly. You can always find me in the library if I’m there.”

“Course, Prince, course.” Harry answered. He split off from Prince and made his way up the stairs to the common room. Harry arrived in time to see the chaos within spill out the door as McGonagall pulled Ginny along behind her. The girl was wailing painfully, and McGonagall finally turned to her on what seemed to be her last straw.

"Ms. Weasley, you will come along quietly, or I will be forced to bespell you. You have tried my patience far enough."

Ginny continued screaming. McGonagall pointed her wand at Ginny, and a silent red spell shot out, and Ginny went limp. McGonagall saw him where he was as she picked Ginny up into her arms, and she raised her chin shortly.

"Continue on inside Mr. Potter. Curfew has been raised."

Harry didn't ask and slipped in quickly, looking around the stunned common room before joining Neville by the fire. Percy sat down before he could start talking, and Harry patiently listened to the list of new restrictions. Once that was done, he and Neville both were too tired to do anything but retire to bed. Plans and discussions would wait until morning.

III

Morning, however, was a bittersweet event. The immediate announcement at breakfast was that Dumbledore had been suspended that evening, and Hagrid taken away. Despite Harry's misgivings about Dumbledore's competency, he was still terrified that Dumbledore was gone. A meddlesome old man or not, people still feared him. Removing Dumbledore was as good as giving the Heir full leeway to wreak havoc. A cold, icy feeling settled into Harry's stomach and he stopped eating immediately. Neville followed suit. When Harry left, Neville trailed after him. Partway through the halls, however, Prince strode by them, and then tripped, dropping his bag and losing several books and pieces of parchment. He swore, and gathered it back up. The action was so incongruous with what Harry knew of him, that Harry stopped to watch him for several moments, before turning idly away. Neville, however, was apparently paying more attention than he was, and, as Prince stood up to stride angrily off down the corridor, Neville poked Harry and bent to retrieve a paper from the floor.

"He forgot this." Neville helpfully said. Harry reached over and took it, before opening it and reading the note inside, Neville looking over his shoulder.

'I'm not heading to class; I think we overlooked something, Potter.'

Neville stepped back to look at Harry carefully. "Since when?"

Harry shoved the paper into his pocket. "Early this year, when I was avoiding Lockhart, I happened upon him in a little-used corner of the library, okay?"

Neville closed his eyes and mouthed several things to himself. "Well, apparently he knows something and ... you were discussing the attacks, weren't you?"

Harry sniffed. "Well, yeah. He's how I knew it wasn't Malfoy, and it's not any of the Slytherins. I ... I trust him, somewhat. Enough that he's being truthful on this. He wouldn't lie about something so important."

Neville gave him another calculating look and then shrugged, hefting his rucksack on his shoulder. "Fine, then. If you're doing something about the attacks, someone needs to listen, provide a voice of reason, and then fetch the teachers while you stick your neck out. Lead on."

Harry looked over at Neville for several long moments. Neville really was confusing him at the moment, but he gave up on trying to understand, and only crumpled the paper and walked swiftly towards the library, breaking out of the group of Gryffindors with ease and stalking on to the realm of books. He found Prince's corner easily and slipped back there, Neville hanging back. Prince eyed him carefully before speaking.

"What's Longbottom doing here?"

Harry shrugged idly, stifling his unease. "Backup. He thinks I'm going to be doing crazy stuff and insists on following so as to make sure that once I start in on it, he can leave and fetch the teachers while I stick my neck out."

Prince cracked a smile as he listened. "A pragmatic Gryffindor?"

Neville merely inclined his head, and shrugged. "I like being in one piece. What idea attacked you to get you to skip class?"

"I was thinking the same of yourself," Prince returned, "but I was thinking of the person Potter had mentioned that died: What Myrtle do you know of in the castle?"

Neville frowned and Harry echoed his expression. "None, why?"

Prince looked between them. "There's a ghost in the second floor bathroom, a young ghost named Moaning Myrtle. The girl was killed in the castle wasn't she? And the Bloody Baron told me she'd been here for fifty years."

"The Chamber was last opened then ..." Harry whispered. "You think she's ..."

Prince nodded. "And we might as well go ask her. There won't be as many students about, right now, since it's class, so we can get down there easy without that group. And the other thing is that that message? It was right outside her bathroom."

Harry paused, and slowly nodded. "That ... Let's go."

Harry stepped towards the bookshelves, and then bowed Prince past. Prince took the gesture with a smile and passed both him and Neville to lead the way out and down the stairs. Harry and Neville followed, Neville several feet behind Harry, watching the surroundings warily. They slowly came around, and then passed into the corridor by the message. However, they didn't expect to see a new addition. Prince stopped and stared, and Harry and Neville looked past him with a sinking sensation.

HER SKELETON WILL LIE IN THE CHAMBER FOREVER

"What ..."

"He struck again." Prince whispered. "Oh, Merlin, Mary, and Morgan."

"This is not cool." Neville murmured. "So ... Myrtle? Can we? And then report what all we know?"

Prince nodded slowly, and, after seeing Harry's glassy look, grabbed his shoulder and dragged him into the bathroom with the 'Out of Order' sign. Once inside, he released Harry and strode farther in. "Myrtle? Would you like to talk?"

A chubby, bespectacled female ghost floated out from one of the stalls and sniffed at them. "You're all boys. What are you doing in here?"

Prince gave her a disarming smile that Harry absently thought was rather incongruous on his face. However, it seemed to work wonders on Myrtle's demeanour, as did his choice of words.

"We were wondering about how you died, Myrtle."

Myrtle's face lit into a bright smile. "Oh, it was terrible!" She said with relish. "It happened right in here, this very cubicle. I was hiding because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and then I heard somebody come in. They must have said something in a different language, but whoever they were was also a boy. I unlocked the door to go and tell him to go use his own toilet, and then —" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining, "I died."

Neville coughed lightly, but Harry managed to keep himself looking interested while Prince looked just as attentive as before, if not more so. "That's so sad, Myrtle." He said, sounding excited. "Was there anything else?"

"No, not really." She said, disappointed. "I just remember seeing a pair of great big, yellow eyes before my body seized up and I was floating away ... but then I came back. I wanted to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she ever teased me about my glasses."

"Where were these eyes?" Prince queried. His interest was unfeigned now, and Harry felt the same."

“Somewhere over there.” She waved negligently to the sink before her toilet. Prince glanced back at Harry before striding to the tap and examining it. Finally, he looked at the side and called Harry over. Harry went, noticing Neville edge towards the door of the bathroom once more, and looked where Prince pointed. Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

“That tap’s never worked.” Myrtle offered helpfully. Prince nodded absently, and then paused, glanced at Harry, and spoke. Harry clearly heard the hissing this time, and just as clearly, he understood it.

“Open.”

The sink sank beneath the floor, revealing a large hole in the wall behind it, leading into a deep pipe. Prince froze and stared, glancing nervously back at Neville.

“Well. I think we found the Chamber of Secrets.”

A/N: Well, things should continue on Thursdays once more ... Please feel free to point out any inconsistencies in my writing, and I will try to straighten them out. Thank you for reading, thanks even more for everyone who's reviewed.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Eleven

The pipe down to the Chamber was dark, long, and slimy. Harry went before Prince did and slid down, trying not to think about what might be at the bottom. Neville had been sent to go find McGonagall and tell her about the Chamber, the message, and the basilisk, and that he and Prince were going down after it, and whoever had been taken. The general feel was that it just might be Ginny, and Harry didn't want to risk her being stuck down there in what was likely mortal peril.

Prince's response to that had been a sneer. Harry had rather rudely told him where to shove it, and received a laugh in response.

The pipe finally levelled off, and Harry was shot out into a large circular room littered with small skeletons. Prince came shortly thereafter, landing where Harry had vacated, and he stood slowly, looking warily around the room, his hand going nervously into his pocket and then coming back out holding his pellet gun. Harry nodded, feeling several times calmer. Thinking to lighten the mood, Harry grinned weakly.

"What is it with us getting into all the stuff Dumbledore should have taken care of?"

Prince scowled deeper. "Dumbledore is a meddlesome old codger, and a manipulative bat."

Harry felt his mouth twitch bitterly, remembering the howler he'd heard Dumbledore receive. "You know, while he was at the Longbottoms', Dumbledore got a howler from a man and a woman reaming him out for trying to use their nephew as leverage against his father, who apparently was Professor Snape."

Harry said it all in an evenly curious tone of voice, but Prince froze suddenly behind him. Harry looked, and was surprised to find Prince staring at him, his mouth faintly open, looking completely gobsmacked. Harry frowned thoughtfully before understanding dawned. It explained a lot. "You're ... you're Snape's son? The ..."

Prince looked twice as trapped once more, and then chewed his lip before nodding slowly in defeat. "Uh ... yeah. It's, it's ... please."

Harry blinked, and shook his head slowly. "I won't breath a word ..." Because if my dad finds out I'm friends with Snape's son, he won't think twice before reaming me out.

Prince looked him over once more before he nodded slowly and moved deceptively quickly into the lead. Harry followed him silently turning over what this meant. It explained Snape's attitude toward Prince, and Prince's to Snape, as well as several other factors. But it opened many more questions. Why was Prince apparently so close to his uncle? Why hadn't he been raised by Snape? Why had no one known? And why was his name different? It seemed so strange, but as Prince slowed ahead of him, Harry forced himself back to the present, and looked ahead in Prince's wand light. Something glistened, and Harry strained his eyes to see.

"What ... that looks like skin, Prince."

"Snakeskin. Basilisk skin." Prince said reverently. "Merlin, Mary and Morgan, it's huge."

Harry winced, and looked across the large shed skin. It was a lot bigger than he'd thought it might be, looking to be over twenty feet long, even though he had avoided considering that.

"Prince, your gun won't even tickle it, will it?" Harry asked hoarsely. Prince didn't answer, instead looking the skin over from head to toe and talking to himself. When Harry thought he heard some number come off his lips, Harry stomped his foot and growled, "Prince!"

Prince jumped and looked back at him. Harry glared. "This will still be here. There's someone trapped down here and we have to find them."

Prince blinked and ducked his head, looking mildly shame-faced. "Sorry, we do need to go." He took the lead once more, and Harry fell into step behind him. The dark tunnel continued, turning and winding through the darkness. In front of him, Prince strode with a calm Harry

found himself mimicking, and slowly, as he acted the part, he began to feel more comfortable in it. He did know a few good curses, and he could certainly find a creative way to bring an end.

He hoped.

A second door loomed over them and Harry looked up nervously at the snakes guarding the portal. Harry didn't need to glance over at Prince. The doors looked as though they were alive, and Harry hissed quietly, "Open." The snakes' glinted and pulled apart, splitting to reveal the chamber beyond. Harry stepped forward a moment and stopped, Prince standing nervously beside him. Both surveyed the Chamber in awe.

Towering stone pillars led into the long, dimly lit room, supporting a ceiling lost in darkness above. A dim greenish glow lit the gloom that hung over the area, and each column was carved in giant twining snakes. Harry felt his heart pound against his ribcage and breathed carefully.

"Prince?"

Prince nodded faintly and stepped forward, scanning the area unceasingly and changing his pellet gun into his right hand, his wand now in his left. Harry swallowed and fingered his own. Holly and Phoenix feather, eleven inches. Brother of Voldemort's and destined for great things. Harry's back straightened. He could do this.

They walked to the last row of pillars and stared up at the large statue ensconced at the end. It was a large statue of a man, with a monkey-like face, an ancient look and a long, thin beard almost level with the sweeping robes he wore, above his large, grey bare feet. Between the feet, face down on the smooth chamber floor was a small figure in black robes with gleaming red hair. Harry glanced at Prince only a moment before he ran quietly forward to grab her and shake her, rolling Ginny over to look down at her face and whisper her name in the cavernous room.

"Ginny, Ginny wake up." Harry felt his blood chill as he looked at Ginny's face. She was white and cold, her eyes closed as though asleep, but she wasn't responding. "Please wake up."

Harry heard Prince hiss in surprise before another voice spoke.

"She won't wake."

Harry turned and found a lean, black-haired boy standing by the nearest pillar. Prince was watching him from several feet away, his body tense, and Harry wasn't sure what to think. He warily eyed him, and then returned to trying to wake Ginny. Finally, he found a weak, fluttery pulse and felt something in him relax.

"She's alive, Prince, but just ..." Harry glanced up and saw Prince nod marginally, not taking his eyes off the black-haired teenager. Finally, Prince jerked his head up at the boy.

"Who are you?"

The black-haired boy looked Prince over, before stepping forward to give a marginal bow. "Tom Riddle."

The announcement made Harry stiffen even more. Tom Riddle was the owner of that diary, a diary he now saw once more lying on the ground at the edge of Ginny's reach. Ice seemed to crawl down his spine, and Prince glanced down at the diary as well. It should have been with McGonagall ...

"You are not real." Prince announced slowly.

Riddle smiled thinly. "I'm not. Yet. I'm a memory, preserved in a diary for fifty years."

Harry saw Prince stiffen at the modifier of 'Yet' Harry once more looked down at Ginny, and then he whipped out his wand and summoned the diary to his hands. Riddle stiffened in a very satisfying way to see the diary move into Harry's hands.

Prince smiled thinly in turn. “What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?”

Riddle seemed to relax once more, and smiled a dark little smile. “A lot, actually.”

“You opened the Chamber fifty years ago, didn’t you? You framed Hagrid.” Prince observed. He managed a casual tone Harry never would have with such loaded words. Instead, Harry focused on working Ginny into a position where he might be able to lift her. The diary he pocketed. “How did you manage it now? What sorts of enchantments are on that diary?”

Riddle smiled once more, and Harry felt nervous once more. That smile was very nerve-wracking to see. “It’s a secret, that. But the diary was certainly important.”

“Clearly.” Prince allowed, looking like he was discussing politics over tea. Harry really did hope he could manage that kind of cool. It seemed very useful. “It’s quite the riddle.” Riddle’s face darkened, and Harry noted a short flash of triumph in Prince’s eyes. “I’ve never heard of a pureblood family named Riddle, you know. Are you a half-blood?” Prince’s face darkened. “A half-blood heir of Slytherin?”

“Clearly,” Riddle growled. His composure seemed half-gone, “You understand nothing.”

“What kind of monster uses a child to do their dirty work?” Harry snarled. It seemed just the thing to say, as Riddle snapped his eyes to him and glared once more.

“It was all I needed, James.” Harry froze. “Yes, I could recognize you. I look at more than mere words when someone writes, and though I couldn’t tell who you really were, once I saw you again, I knew. And I was forced to use whatever comes into my realm. Ginny here worked perfectly. Small, she was. Weak. Simple. It was easy to overcome her. I strengthened every time she wrote and poured all her little secrets into my pages, until I could give in return, put some of my strength into her and get what I wanted.”

"So you controlled her." Prince drawled. "Killing roosters, writing messages, ordering your serpent to attack. Your basilisk." Prince sneered. Harry stiffened; he'd apparently missed a lot of what was going on. "What a waste of a magnificent creature. A waste of heritage."

Riddle looked once more to Prince and looked him over slowly. "And what would you know of heritage? You, who aren't even British, who don't belong here, in this castle, with others of more noble blood. You can't be pureblood, boy."

Prince darted a glance to Harry and hesitated, before he straightened and met Riddle glare for glare. "You deceive yourself. You may have parseltongue, but I am more Slytherin than you could be. I have stronger wizard blood; I am a true heir of Slytherin. My gift is blood borne; so don't tell me you have greater power. I was raised out of Britain so that I would survive."

Harry forced his jaw to remain shut and not gape. Prince couldn't be telling the truth, but Harry couldn't find it in himself to doubt him. Riddle's reaction, however, was to freeze in place. He was staring at Prince with an unreadable expression, but ever so slowly, the mask cracked and what showed through was unadulterated hate.

"You ... a petty child, with no history ... cannot be an heir. There are no heirs other than myself. I made sure of that."

Prince smirked. The expression made Harry want to smack him one and he half-liked the boy; Riddle looked fit to commit murder. His hands twitched, and he growled,

"Would that I could still kill you now. Would that one of you would fall prey to me in your time."

Prince's expression faltered. "Who are you?" He asked. "Who would you be now?"

Riddle looked at him, and then scratched at the air with his finger. In its wake remained burning yellow fire, until he had written out,

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

He waved his hand behind the writing, and the letters moved and changed places. Where his name had been, now stood the phrase,

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

Prince stared at him long and hard, and Harry felt himself freeze in place. This was Voldemort?

"I'd used that name in Hogwarts, among only my most trusted. I became great; I know I did. And then something happened and I slipped out of sight. I will return, and you two, both of you," Riddle's burning eyes scanned over Harry and Harry glared back unflinchingly, "will be among the first to die. Mark my words."

Prince yawned unconcernedly, and then walked over to Harry, pulling the diary from his pocket. "Enchantments can break, Riddle. What can a memory do to affect the present?"

Riddle had apparently had enough. He growled and turned from both of them, striding forward to face the statue, looking up at its face in reverence. Harry was directly in front of him, but Prince suddenly stepped over to grab Harry's arm and pull.

"Ditch Ginny by its foot, he's getting the goddamn basilisk." Prince snapped quietly, staring at Riddle as he hissed at the statue, ignoring his words.

Harry felt the blood drain from his face and quickly laid Ginny back down, sliding her against the foot, "But is she safe ..."

"He won't dare harm her, Harry, he needs her." Prince growled, pulling him away and towards the columns at the walls. "We, however, are in danger. Do you know any useful spells against basilisks?"

Harry shook his head bluntly, and then swallowed. "We can't fight it if we can't look at it. We need to blind it first off."

"Do you know the spell?"

"Something like conjuntiv-something?"

"Shit." Prince swore. He quickly ejected the small magazine from his gun, which Harry thought might be different from last year but he wasn't sure, and replaced it with another striped neon green. Harry looked at him curiously. "Acid pellets. It's damn strong, should be able to blind the thing. If I shoot right." Prince's face was dead white and his hands trembled faintly. Harry knew his own were shaking rather hard. They both looked over and watched Riddle. Harry had missed whatever Riddle had said to the statue while he and Prince were getting out of his way, but now he saw that the mouth of the statue had ground open, and something was moving inside. Prince grabbed his shoulder and threw him to the ground, using Harry's distraction to get him off balance.

Something huge hit the stone floor of the chamber, and the ground shuddered. Harry slammed his eyes shut, knowing the snake was uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. He next heard a gunshot, followed by several more. Sharp hissing exploded from the snake, a mess of words Harry didn't bother to try and understand. Riddle hissed once more.

"Kill them! Brush it off and kill them!"

Prince fired again, at least five times, and more hissing sounded. Harry could see nothing, keeping his head down and his eyes ground shut. Again, Prince fired, bringing forth more, absolutely furious hissing. Harry heard a click, a faint cuss, and it seemed the Prince was fishing in his pocket for something, amongst much clinking. A muttered, 'Where the –purple!' preceded another click and then three more shots, louder than before. The basilisk exploded in enraged spitting, thrashing and making the ground tremble. Prince grabbed Harry's shoulder roughly.

"Get up and get moving! Open your eyes."

Trusting him, Harry scrambled up and looked. The snake before him was thrashing furiously, dark blood coating its face. It turned, and Harry stiffened before he saw that both the snake's eyes were now

useless. One was a mass of flesh, the other, burned white and stuck half-shut. Clearly, whatever Prince had used had worked. Riddle was hissing furiously.

“Ignore the pain, kill them! You can still smell; kill them both!”

Prince ran across the chamber, heading for the far wall and Harry followed. The snake was still swaying drunkenly, seeming unable to gain its bearings. It hissed, licking at the air, and then, before their eyes, it lunged. Harry tripped as it slammed past his back, knocking him off balance. Prince spun, catching him where he was, and then something smashed across Harry’s skull, throwing him to the ground as someone yelled in panic. The ground shuddered, and Harry rolled painfully across the floor, looking out and feeling his blood freeze. Prince lay weakly on the floor, blood coating his shoulders, his eyes tight with pain. The basilisk, clearly what him thrown him away from Harry, snapped forward and bit into his leg. Prince screamed, and the snake dropped him, guiding its head to look over to where Harry was, and opening its mouth.

The reaction was completely unconscious. Harry was sure he was still thinking that Prince was dead saving his life, but his wand came up, and only a thought later a pale blue spell struck the snake in its open mouth. It thrashed backwards, spitting in pain. Harry knew the next spell well, though, could clearly see where he was going.

“Reducto! Diffindo!” One after the other, the spells went straight into the snake’s mouth. The patch of silvery ice at the back of the snake’s mouth shattered into its throat, the cutting curse slipped into the centre of the damage, straight through to sever its spine. The snake dropped heavily to the ground, its tail thrashing in place. It took several more moments before Harry really caught on that the snake was dead, and the room was silent save for someone gasping for breath not far away. Harry’s heart sank, and he forced himself to stand and stagger to Prince’s side.

Prince’s skin was pasty white, and shining with beads of sweat. The skin on his shoulders was torn and bleeding from being slammed into the ground, and his leg was bleeding sluggishly where the snake had bit him. Overtop of the wound was the diary, a hole clean through the

cover. Harry hadn't even realized Riddle was gone before then, but with the diary destroyed, he was nowhere to be found.

A faint gasp came from over by the statue, and Harry dimly remembered that Ginny had been there. Coughing slightly, he called out, "Ginny, are you awake? Are you –you okay?" Harry was still staring at Prince's tight face, where he was panting shallowly with his eyes shut tightly. Around his neck, a pendant burned a steady brilliant white.

"H-Harry?" Ginny's voice trailed over. "Harry, w-where are we? Wh-what happened, you –Oh!" Harry presumed she'd seen the basilisk, and short, unsteady steps came their way. Ginny fell to her knees by Prince's side, and clasped her hands to her mouth. "Oh, Merlin, what –Oh, what have I done, what's happened? What's going to happen? It's terrible!" She was crying, then, sobbing weakly, and finally, Harry stood on unsteady legs.

"Ginny, stop. We have to get him – have to get out of here." Harry gave her a firm look, and clamped down on his own panic. "We just – he has to get out of here. Um ..." Harry wracked his mind for the spell, and, finding it, gestured Ginny out of the way before he cast, "mobilicorpus." Prince lifted off the ground, and as Harry turned, he floated gently behind. Harry felt slightly disturbed, and firmly looked away, aware of the spell even without seeing it. Harry turned to Ginny and grabbed her hand. "Now, we need to go." Harry picked the diary off the floor and firmly started for the exit. If they could get him out, Prince would be fine. He had to be.

The walk back seemed twice as long as had been to get there, even though Harry broke into a jog partway along. Ginny fought to keep up with him, tears still streaming down her face. However, Harry had never been happier to see his parents than he was when he found them milling about the bottom of the pipe, watching for others to come down. Harry saw them and yelled wordlessly. James spun, his wand raised, and then choked as he saw Harry.

"Harry!" James ran straight over to him, pulling him into a hug, but Harry pushed him away quickly, and pointed to Prince.

"Dad, he's dying! Please, he has to get back up. I don't know ... the basilisk bit him when he was keeping me safe. Please!"

James stared in horror, and Lily took over spelling Prince, quickly heading back to the bottom of the pipe, where Sirius had just come down. She cast one spell, and yelled up the pipe.

"I've got a poisoned student, he needs to go up the pipe. Someone get that portkey down here now!"

Harry remained his James' embrace for several moments more, until he saw Ginny standing aside looking forlorn and pale. Harry squirmed, and gently pointed Ginny out to his father. James frowned, but called out,

"Ginny, come over here. You look pale. I'm so sorry all this mess happened. Come over here."

Ginny hesitantly came over, and Harry pulled her up against him, into James grip with Harry as well. Remus came down, then, and James pulled them over to the length of knotted rope he had.

"It's keyed straight into the Hospital wing." Remus stated. "Everyone hold it. Lily, you have the boy?" Lily nodded, and Harry grabbed on with Ginny beside him. The jerk grabbed them, and they were yanked out of place, landing roughly in the pristine white of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was already preparing a bed, and Professor Snape stood nearby. His colour became ashen when he saw Prince floating there, and he grabbed him out of the air and took him straight to the bed, lying him down and yelling an order to Madam Pomfrey. James picked Harry up and placed him on a bed across the room, sitting beside him and holding him against his side tightly. Harry watched the goings on around Prince with tight focus, his body shivering with cold and dread.

Prince was shaking now. Harry hadn't looked at him the entire trip up, not wanting to see how far everything was going. His skin had become flushed, and he was sweating heavily as he shuddered in place, his hands clenching and releasing as he tossed and turned. The white necklace he was wearing was flickering now, and the cloth

near it was smoking lightly. Snape suddenly came back in, thrust several vials at Madam Pomfrey, and then angrily dropped in front of the fireplace, tossing in the floo powder and thrusting his head through.

As Harry stared, James hugged his tighter and gently picked up Harry's necklaces. "Son, are you going to need a new one of these every year?"

Harry turned his attention back to his father and blinked slowly. "What?"

James let Harry's snake pendant drop back to his throat and held up the remains of the small key-shaped pendant that alerted his family upon him ending up in danger. It was twisted out of shape and cracked, and Harry stared. He hadn't even noticed it heat up in the middle of the fight. Harry could only shrug helplessly, and hug his father back.

"Don't know. I don't mean to, it just ... happens."

James chuckled and held him close. "I suppose they do. I can't really judge; you've been doing what we've taught you, doing what is right." Harry felt his father hesitate, "I'm proud of you, Harry. For everything you've done, this year and last. Absolutely everything."

Harry felt his breath catch, and just remained in place, soaking in his father's love, before a rather loud ruckus made him look up once more. A scruffy man came through the floo first, stamping his feet out, and turning to catch the man who followed, a taller blond who looked a little harried, and who was wearing thick, utilitarian robes. In his arms was a large box, filled with phials and clinking lightly, which had clearly thrown his balance off. They both placed it down quickly, and the blond paused to spit a small vial out of his mouth.

"Does anyone know the length the basilisk was? I need to know how much venom it likely had." The tall blond snapped.

Several people shook their heads, but Harry slowly raised his own and murmured, "It was more than twenty feet long."

James blinked, and froze, reflexively relaying the words, “Harry says it was more than twenty feet long.”

The man glanced up, his face tight, and immediately went to Alan’s side, swearing faintly as he pulled the stopper from the vial and upended it completely over Alan’s leg, letting the contents – a frighteningly small amount indeed – pour over the wound before he tapped gently at Alan’s cheek. The scruffy man looked between them, and spoke quietly. A dismissive gesture was made; the man straightened and then spoke.

“Severus, if you could help Green out? He’s going to need several of those quickly, now most like. I’m going to see what all happened, okay?”

Severus nodded curtly, and stalked over to Green, as the scruffy man stepped away and pulled up a seat on the bed Harry was seated on. He paused, and then smiled at James.

“Geoffrey Alfaerus. You interrupted a ‘discussion’ between Lucius Malfoy and myself last summer. You would be James Potter, correct?”

James freed a hand and met Geoffrey in a handshake. “I am indeed. You are?”

“Alan’s guardian. I’ve been taking care of him his whole life. So, Harry was with Alan when he got himself bitten? What was happening that two children took care of something that should have been left to adults, or, better yet, the Headmaster?” Geoffrey asked.

“I would have dealt with it, had I been allowed to remain here as headmaster.” Dumbledore announced, coming through the door. “However, circumstances went beyond my control when I was suspended. I grieve that the children felt the need to deal with it themselves.” Dumbledore walked over, and gave Geoffrey a small smile. “It’s good to meet you in person, Geoffrey.”

"I wish I could say the same." Geoffrey allowed in a tight voice. "However, I'm still wondering what happened. What was it that preceded this? Severus said something about a Chamber of Secrets and petrified students ..."

"Yes, it was the Chamber of Secrets that was being opened, and students were being petrified. However, I believe I am missing as much of the picture as you are, and would like to hear from young Harry how he came to solve our mystery for us ..."

Harry squirmed under the scrutiny and looked down; missing the nasty look Geoffrey shot Dumbledore. James rubbed Harry's head, and finally, Harry began to talk. He talked straight through the diary, to the assumption of the basilisk (mentioning only his knowledge, not Prince's, but Geoffrey nodded as though he understood anyways) and onward through to Prince grabbing him to drag him along to meet Myrtle, as back-up, supposedly, because he could talk to snakes and warn of the basilisk coming. Prince asked him to open the sink, Neville was sent for backup, and they went down. Harry roughly told of Ginny's involvement, and of Tom Riddle, sparing nothing, through Prince's shooting, the basilisk's final attack, and when Prince got poisoned but did in the diary anyways. Geoffrey frowned at that, and straightened.

"Green, there might be contamination in that wound. Some ink, possibly with lingering enchantments."

Green responded with a very rude and confusing phrase that made Madam Pomfrey gasp, and start lecturing him. Green appeared to ignore her and demanded several things at once from Pomfrey and Severus. Both glared at him, but went about the designated tasks with efficiency. His language could apparently wait. Geoffrey and Dumbledore looked back to Harry, who merely shrugged.

"That's pretty much it. I went to see if Prince was okay, Ginny woke up, and we brought Prince back to the end where you guys were coming down the open way behind us. Now ..." Harry stared at his shoes in silent worry. He jumped when someone placed their hand on his shoulder, and looked up to see Geoffrey giving him a crooked smile.

"You did good, kid. You did very well, better than I would have expected from someone so young. I'm sure Alan will be fine; Green's put him through worse before, sure enough. Basilisk poison ..." Geoffrey laughed lightly. "His necklace could handle that, but it really helped you get him up here fast. It helped a lot."

Harry nodded slowly and curled up against James again, trying to ignore the niggling worry in the back of his head that told him he knew Geoffrey was playing it down. The bed shifted as Geoffrey stood and left, and Harry felt the rumble as his father spoke. "So, everything seems to be in hand?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore answered. "The Chamber shut once no one was inside, so exploration will have to wait until the children feel better. I'm sure Alan will recover fully; his uncle, at least, is confident of it. However, I believe Harry has had a trying evening and would best sleep it off."

Harry nodded against James' chest, and James laughed, and called out. "You got a calming or sleeping draught over there?"

A glance proved that Green lifted his head a moment, and slipped his wand into his hand. A phial from the shelf near Pomfrey's desk lifted, and shot their way. James yelped, but Harry sat up quickly and, true to any seeker's skill, caught it easily. A bark of laughter came from the group across the hall, followed by Pomfrey's strident voice once more. James stood to lay Harry back in the bed, and checked out the phial before handing it back over. "It's a full dose, Harry, so drink it all down, alright? You'll be feeling better in the morning."

"You'll tell me how Prince is, though, right? Please?"

James smiled softly. "Of course I will. You heard Geoffrey. Mr. Green has it all in hand."

Harry smiled faintly and drank, laying back onto the crisp sheets, and resting his head. He felt more than ready to just drift away on the next breeze, but sleep eluded him for several minutes, even as he relaxed

completely. James left, apparently thinking him asleep, and Harry heard him talk to Geoffrey.

"How is Alan, then?"

"What makes you think he's other than what I said?" Geoffrey's tone was amiable and light. Clearly, James didn't believe him.

"I saw his pendent flickering when he was brought in, and it was burning through his clothes. The poison was more than it could handle, wasn't it? Basilisk poison ..."

"It was. Green is half-panicked still. Alan is holding onto life something fierce, but snake venom is hardy, and that of a basilisk is strong. That pendant has been treated with phoenix tears, but as they're not in his system, they can only stop it temporarily and as it is ... If Harry had been any less together in getting him out of there, Alan would've been dead by the time you found them. I'm surprised Green even had phoenix tears on hand, and to have used them all up and still be fighting ... I'm sure he'll pull through; the poison from the basilisk must be gone, I'm sure." Geoffrey's sincerity seemed strained.

There was silence, and then James gruffly said, "Thank you, for at least letting Harry relax."

"He's twelve. Mortality is real, but his eyes ... He's worried sick about Alan. Are they friends?"

James snorted. "Hardly. They probably barely know each other. I know they ran into each other on the train, but Alan's in Slytherin and Harry's a Gryffindor. But wouldn't you freak out if someone was nearly killed in front of you? From what he said, Alan was bit keeping Harry safe. Any child would feel responsible."

"Indeed. It was an observation." Geoffrey allowed. "I think Green does have a handle on it, though."

"He looks almost hyper." James observed, amused.

"He is." Harry heard his father choke. "Green loves challenges. He's both hyper and absolutely tense. Alan is always playing with potions with him, so he knows more than any of us, and I'm sure he's never had to worry about enchanted inks before ..."

Harry relaxed, finally slipping asleep, losing track of the conversation as he finally slowed down. He remembered, though. That was not a conversation he was going to forget.

||||

The next morning, Harry was released to take Ginny to the morning, celebratory feast of the end of the terror. Everyone was ecstatic to see them, asking questions non-stop. Harry sent Fred and George as well as Percy pleading glances, and between the older Weasleys and Neville, they managed to get peaceful seats at the table with a buffer on either side. Ginny was sniffling quietly, and Harry was dead silent. Neville didn't bother to ask. Percy wasn't so observant.

"Harry, what's to be sad about? You look terrible. I'll have you know I'm very glad to see you had the sense of mind to both send someone for help and still go down to clear up the mess. Although, you really shouldn't have done so alone, I don't see how we would have managed had you not gone. Ginny might be dead."

Harry quietly clenched his fist around hid fork. "That's the problem, Percy. Prince is still sick."

Percy blinked and began a question. His question became a yelp, however, when the twin across from him gave him a firm kick to the shin. He turned on him instead, demanding to know why he was acting so childish. While he was causing a scene, Harry stood from the table and left the Great Hall, even before Dumbledore had time to make the announcement about the lifting of the current precautions. Neville watched him go without following. Harry had never been more grateful for how close he was to Neville before, as he slipped out of the Hall in silence, with no one noticing. Slowly, Harry made his way up to the library, to the dark back corner where he'd first run into Prince.

Tears he'd been fighting since the day before, tears held back by adrenaline and shock, slipped from his eyes as he curled into a corner on the floor. Harry pulled a book randomly from the shelves and propped it on his knees, struggling to concentrate. His father had told him that Prince was still unconscious, but that everything was in hand and he should be waking within the week. He'd said the damage had been bad; it was a basilisk, but that he'd truly saved Prince's life. Harry had forced himself to simply look concerned. His father wouldn't have understood how simply devastated Harry was to hear that. He'd grown attached to Prince. Prince was smart, clever, and he didn't care that Harry wasn't exactly Gryffindor. Harry didn't feel like he had a set of limits in which he had to stay with Prince, limits Harry felt every time he talked to another Gryffindor. He'd only ever been this comfortable with Neville before, and now ... Harry was losing his best friend.

Giving up on the book, Harry curled into a ball in the corner and hid from the world.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who is reading and reviewing, and even those who don't review (although I'd love you if you did) The schedule remains at one chapter every second Thursday, and I hope you are all enjoying the story.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twelve

Four days later, Alan was awake and sitting cross-legged on his hospital bed, holding his wand loosely in his teeth as he read one of his potions book late into the evening. On the bed just to his right, Green was sleeping in a very uncomfortable looking sprawl half-off the bed. There were still concerns about long-term damage he might have from the poison. So far, there had not been many true worries. Alan was in dangerous territory with magical exhaustion -the pendant had been tapping into his magic in part- and he still trembled some, but both were expected to heal given time. The poison from the basilisk was gone, and the remnant effects of the ink were simply a chronic ache in his chest and head. However, recovering from poison was not something Alan was unfamiliar with, so he was naturally stubborn enough to ignore orders and use his magic for a weak light and remain awake late at night. He certainly didn't have classes to worry about, and *lumos* was not a very draining spell.

It was due to Alan being wide-awake that he noticed immediately when the door to the hospital wing moved. Alan quickly extinguished the light and closed his book, lying back on his bed, with the book under his arm as whoever it was came in. Alan watched, though, not closing his eyes. He was surprised to see nobody, even as the door finished opening, and then was slowly closed once more. Alan was impressed. Whoever it was was completely invisible and as of that moment had made no sound. Several more moments passed in silence, and Alan scanned the hospital wing as much as he could from his position. He saw and heard nothing, save a short snort from Green on the bed.

“Prince?”

Alan whipped his eyes up to the air beside his bed. “Who,” Alan whispered in return, his eyebrows ducking down in confusion. Whoever had spoken had been practically right next to him. But the voice had also been very familiar.

Alan jumped as air suddenly rippled aside to reveal Harry Potter, standing right by his bed. Alan sat up slowly, watching him, and cursing himself. He knew Potter had an invisibility cloak. He knew he

did; he'd run into him last year while he was using the thing. However, Alan immediately noticed the horrible pallor of Potter's face and looked at him curiously. Potter swallowed, and gestured weakly to Alan's bed. In response, Alan curled up his legs and sat up cross-legged once more, giving Potter a wry smile.

"By all means, join me. I'm rather bored stuck in here."

Potter hopped up and sat down, stuffing his cloak into his lap and looking him over with a drawn expression. Alan grew concerned. Potter never looked this sickly before. He hadn't thought Potter had gotten hurt down there, but maybe his dad had been wrong ...

"Are you doing okay, Prince?" Potter asked. "No one will tell me the truth."

Alan blinked. Wait, Potter was concerned for him? "I'm doing fine, really. Nothing worse than what's happened before." Potter looked at him, and Alan bristled. He didn't need to look like he thought he was nuts. "I've been in accidents with Green before where I got poisoned, Potter. My necklace keeps the poison back, though, so I was fine."

"It nearly got overwhelmed, though." Potter whispered. Alan froze. Green hadn't mentioned that.

"How do you know that?" Alan murmured.

"I overheard my dad asking your uncle when they'd thought I was asleep. They gave me a sleeping draught, but it didn't work immediately. They were talking at the end of my bed." Potter looked down at his lap, his voice tiny. "You nearly died, and it was my fault."

Alan twitched, and then cuffed Potter lightly on his ear. Potter looked at him, offended, and Alan glared back. "It was not your fault, and don't you dare take any responsibility for my actions. That whole fiasco was stupid but unavoidable. I didn't talk to you because I thought you were dumb, Potter, so don't prove me wrong." As he'd expected, the insinuation put Potter's back clean up, and Alan grinned. "And I'm alive now. I'll be fine. It's just a bit of soreness and magical exhaustion. I should be out of here in about a week." Alan

paused, and took in Potter's haggard looks. Dark circles ran beneath his eyes, and his hair was more of a bird's nest than before. His mouth was a tight line, and Alan sighed. "Thanks for the worry, though."

Potter's mouth twitched into a small smile. "Does this mean I can get answers now?"

Alan flinched. He'd hoped Potter would forget all of the stuff that had been talked about down in the Chamber. "Potter ..."

"Fair's fair. You said it; it's fair game. I won't talk about it to anyone else. I just want to know."

Alan ran his fingers through his hair, and frowned. "Fine. You have to find the questions, though."

"So you're really Snape's son?" Alan nodded tersely. "Why weren't you raised by him?"

Alan frowned, and looked down at the book in his hands. "Because he never knew I existed. My mother ... She was killed by Voldemort. My godfather brought me to Geoffrey just after that, and I was raised by my aunt and uncle. My father wasn't told because ... there were other things to consider. I'm not going into them."

Potter frowned, "Is that also why you have a different name? Those 'other things'?" Alan nodded tersely to that as well. Potter looked at him with a careful eye, looking more alive than he had since coming in. "There's a lot more to those 'other things' than there is to what I know, isn't there?"

Alan gave him a playful smirk, and raised his eyebrows. Potter shook his head slowly. "So ... are you actually an heir of Slytherin like you said?"

Alan rubbed his face slowly and nodded reluctantly. "Through my mother, I am."

Potter laughed lightly. "Are you sure it's not through Snape?"

"Yes," Alan grinned. "I'm sure."

"And your surviving is among the 'Other Things.'" Potter finished. Alan flinched once more and nodded reluctantly. Potter sighed. "That's ... one Hell of a life. How are you so normal?"

Alan smiled, feeling the nostalgia he always got when he considered his life. "Because of Geoffrey. Him and my godfather." Potter gave him a confused look, and Alan just shrugged. He didn't really understand why himself. "I suppose they never told me I was different so I always believed them."

Potter sighed, and looked down at his cloak, fisting his hand in the fabric. "I wish I could just be myself. Everyone thinks I'm going to be just like my dad."

"You're not." Alan said. Potter looked up at him, and Alan gave him his most honest stare. He wanted Potter to believe him. "You're not your father."

"You know that, Prince. Neville knows that." Potter scowled. "I don't think my dad or mom do, though. And ... I'm not wanting to disillusion them about it, either."

"You're scared of your father." Alan snapped. Sometimes Potter was so stupid. Potter flinched at the words. "It's really clear, Potter." Alan turned the name into an insult. "You won't tell him anything, and you don't dare act openly about who you are. You didn't even tell him outright you were a parseltongue. You let him find out from the other parents, didn't you?" Potter's flinch told him enough. "You're scared he'll hate you for being different." Alan grabbed the snake pendant Potter wore, and pulled it tight on its chain. "Do you think this means nothing? He bought it for you. He's not going to hate you, Potter, so stop being so damn afraid."

Alan released it and sat back, staring intently at where Potter sat. Potter looked torn between being furious and being ashamed. Both barely masked the real terror buried behind them, and Alan frowned. Potter really was scared. He was absolutely terrified of his father, and

he was convinced it was accurate. Alan shivered as he remembered his worst memory, and then he looked at Potter again. Maybe ...

"You ran into a boggart, didn't you?"

Potter jumped. Alan raised his eyebrow and said nothing more. Potter wiped his face and nipped a finger before he nodded slowly. "It was my father, yelling at me for being ... a ... a disgrace. He –he told me
..."

"It was a boggart, Potter." Alan drawled. Potter flinched.

"I know that, but it certainly wasn't wrong! He would react like that! I know he would; he's done it before!"

Alan felt an inexplicable anger at hearing that. "He what?"

Potter ducked his head once more, and didn't answer. Alan suppressed his desire to know, and glanced aside before he spoke. "I face a boggart and I see my godfather dead. It's not wrong, no. But it's not right either. It doesn't say anything about what really will happen. Do you think your dad could hate something more than he loves you?"

Potter fell silent and sat silently in place. Alan let him think, toying with his book and then placing it on the nightstand. Alan turned back to Potter and gave him a small smile. He really did love talking with Potter. He was smart, clever, and he wanted to learn. Alan had always felt like he left the other kids behind in America, and here. Potter fought tooth and nail to keep up and, despite all odds, succeeded. Alan stuck his hand out and smiled at Potter.

"Call me Alan."

||||

Harry had been worried the days since the basilisk was done in. Everyone had noticed, and it finally went around that Harry was feeling responsible for Prince's condition. Several people tried to comfort him, but any of them commenting on the fact that Prince was

Slytherin would send Harry running down the corridors. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He determinedly maintained he did not cry, he hadn't cried since he'd been in the library, but somehow his face had always ended up wet after he'd ran off, and he always felt stuffy and despondent. But he was not crying.

His father, who had remained at the school in support of Harry and also as a bit of 'extra security just to be sure' even if it was a little late, had informed Harry two days later that Prince had woken up, but that he was still sick. Again, it was basilisk poison they said. The damage wouldn't go away easily nor quickly. Harry had felt remotely better, but he still worried about what might happen to Prince anyways. He knew, he'd looked it up once more, that basilisk poison's only counter was phoenix tears. Alan's survival argued that Green had had some, but what still was hurting him terrified Harry as the only thing he could think of was the diary, and he had no clue what that might do or have done. Finally, the evening of the fourth day after the basilisk showdown, Harry took his invisibility cloak and snuck in.

The answers he got were ... surprising, but not too much so. It had been fairly easy to suspect most of them. He hadn't thought Prince would defend his father's side though. Everyone knew how much James Potter hated Slytherins. But Prince had a point.

"Call me Alan."

Harry stopped dead. "What?"

Prince looked him over with amusement once more. "I said 'call me Alan'."

The simplicity of the statement belied what Harry was running through his head. He'd never even considered calling Prince –Alan– by his first name. But he supposed it shouldn't be too strange. Harry hadn't been thick enough to think he was as distraught as he was without valuing Pri- Alan's friendship. Apparently his own friendship was appreciated in turn. The thought warmed Harry as he smiled back at Alan and took Alan's offered hand.

"Then call me Harry."

A/N: End of second year.

Now, third year will be a non-event since there are no evil Azkaban escapees. To be kind, I'll post the chapter that gives an ... interesting form of summary for it, next week, followed with the beginning of fourth year the week after. I hope you all will like it. Reviews will make me far more inclined to hold to that, hm? Reviews make me very happy, and very appreciated. I'd thank reviewers if I'd actually had any last chapter ... glares Please? offers up kitty cat For the siamese?

Fire & Napalm

Letters of a Little Sister

September:

Sept. 1st

Dear Ms. First Year,

I hope you are happy being at Hogwarts already, Melanie. I am most assuredly not, because I was born too late by two months, which apparently places me behind you in magical capability despite being able to perform the same spells as my now-third-year brother. Apparently Nov. 18 just doesn't make the cut for them! So whatever the reason I shall take the boats next year to the as-yet-unknown sorting and meet you as a vaunted second year to my first.

Don't you dare let this make you forget that I can already out-hex you, and that won't have changed by next year.

From,

She-Who-Was-Left-Behind

Sept 2nd

Dear Ms. November,

I can't change the Hogwarts rules and no spell is going to get you in early. We asked already.

One thing I can do is tell you about the sorting. It's a talking hat, and no scepticism! You put it on, and it places you according to your mind. It was so weird. I got put in Gryffindor but I think it considered something else first. Probably Ravenclaw.

I know for a fact you have proven you can hex me into next week, thank you. You did so not two months ago. Neville, in fact, reminded me of it during the opening feast.

As for your brother, I think he accomplished something your father will be very proud of. He hexed a Slytherin within ten minutes of the meal ending. Neville said his name was Prince. He'll be stepping lightly for a while now; Harry got him with tarantallegra.

Good to know you still care,

Ms. March

Sept. 5th

Dear School-Girl,

Dad was ecstatic to hear of Harry having such an attitude; mum is now drafting a letter to ask why as he didn't write about it. I don't think he'll be happy about it being brought up, either, so you may want to avoid him for a bit. You know how it is.

Nothing much happening at home. Mum's getting a tad solemn whenever I gripe about Hogwarts. I think she's going to be lonely when I go.

From,

Nanna

Sept. 9th

Dear Nanna,

Of course she's gonna miss you. Mum's who miss you send more snacks, you know.

And that warning about your brother? Coulda come sooner. Although how I forgot after last summer is beyond me. He was in a bad mood the whole time, wasn't he? But about him, he got himself a detention and lost ten points for hexing Prince.

Speaking of points, I got ten from Flitwick! I knew all about the charm he brought up, and he was so squeaky and happy about it he gave

me points! It was so cute! We're in Charms with Hufflepuff, and the classes are wonderful!

And please don't gripe about not being here. You get one more year without homework. It isn't that bad, but it does cut into evenings and it's really thick.

From,

Melanie

Sept. 14th

Dear Melanie,

I shall not complain if I get a lowdown on all the teachers and students of note by the end of the year.

How you managed to forget Harry's moods is beyond me. I suspect he had to argue his way out of Slytherin; he really has that conniving attitude at times. Don't you dare tell him I said that! He'd kill me.

How many classes do you have with another house? I really want to meet all the students at Hogwarts; sometimes I regret the house system for getting in the way of that, but I suppose I'll just have to try harder. Are you in Gryffindor with anyone of note?

From,

Curious Nanna

Sept. 23rd

Dear Kitty-cat,

People of note in Gryffindor? I hope you mean other than our siblings and Hermione. Although other than them, there aren't too many. Ginny's a year ahead of me, and Lavender Brown, in our brother's year, is useless ...

October-November:

Oct. 11th

Dear Nanna,

I have to ask ... did your brother tell your mom he skipped Charms last week? He's in detention now, a whole week's worth. Prince lit into him about it, and they got into a fight again. Both of them went to the hospital wing, lost twenty points, and ended up in detention together with Filch. It got postponed till next week because Harry's still in detention with Flitwick. They really don't get along.

On another note, it's going to be a few more weeks and then it's the first Quidditch match. Harry and Neville bullied Ron into trying out for reserve keeper, and while he complained at the time, now he's devoted to practice. I'm definitely looking forward to it, but before that I'll get to see the Halloween feast! That's definitely a promising line! I'm so sorry you can't be here for it.

From,

Melanie

Oct. 14th

Dear Melanie,

Once again, my brother neglected to mention something to mother dearest and you may be in trouble once more. I suppose you'll either have to get used to it if you keep commenting on it, or else you're just going to have to deal. How on earth does he manage to end up stuck to his eyeballs in detention? It must take talent, or that Prince is a real brat.

And yes, it is most unfair of you to brag about Quidditch and the Halloween feast. I'm never going to forgive you for it.

From,

Nanna

Oct. 24th

Dear Nanna,

Yes, it's unfair. But right now you can't hex me for it, so deal.

Be grateful you're brother isn't in Divination. Ginny said her brother had been told by the teacher that the fates were convinced something horrible was going to happen to her this month. She was convinced it was ridiculous, but recently she's been looking at him with a frown on her face, and Romilda Vane is going on and on about how she probably ... you know. She's twelve. Old enough for that to show up.

And I'll just add as a side note ... your brother's a pain in the ass.

From,

The Cursed

Oct. 30th

Dear Cursed,

Did you enjoy the message I sent with my brother last time around? I so hope you did. I put so much effort into it. Now then, please don't forget that just because you're hiding out in Hogwarts it doesn't make you safe.

Poor Ginny. That's one thing I'm not looking forward to, as I get older. I suppose it would be rather horrible, but what else are you supposed to do? Can't avoid it, it's a little bit required for some of those other blessings of age. Like a chest.

I hope you appreciated him giving you those lovely nails. They were yellow, weren't they?

From,

Avenged

Nov. 3rd

Dear Birthday Girl,

See if I send you a present this year ...

The Feast was lovely, but I'm sure you don't really need to hear about it, as you are far more interested in the ravages of puberty than the amazing entrancement of the Great Hall in all it's magical glory, and the strengths of our teachers as they extend themselves to magic the walls and decorations into a fabulous display of power and holiday fervour ...

The yellow claws actually came in handy, as they haven't gone away yet. Made for a wonderful costume ...

From,

Ms. Longbottom

Nov. 4th

Dear Ms. Longbottom,

It's alright; Harry gave a good play by play of the feast. However, I will indeed apologize for mocking you and sending curses and hexes so long as I get that play-by-play of the Quidditch match, and my gift. Please?

From,

Ms. Potter

Nov. 8th

Dear Nanna Potter,

Alright, you win.

Merlin, your brother can fly! He was head to head against Slytherin, and oh word! It was miserable. There was too much rain, and I could barely see him at all. The match was dirty dirty dirty from the Slytherin's end, although Prince didn't foul Harry once at all as seekers, although he came damn close. I was placed so I could see a lot of the shots on Oliver Wood, though, and he's a really good keeper. The Slytherin chasers are crap; they could barely aim, and only go through because they made a lot of shots while the Gryffindor chasers were nursing their bruises.

And the Weasley twins kick ass. You really need to work on your skills with them, you'll make a great player, I know you will. And then I'll be chaser too, and everything will be happy. Only person who won't be on the team will be Neville, and, honestly, he doesn't like Quidditch all that much anyways. Unnatural, I know, but true.

You're gift will be coming on time with a card.

From,

Melanie Longbottom

Nov. 20th

Dear Melanie,

I am hugging you so tightly right now I'll be surprised if you can breath.

My parents took me out to a muggle zoo and I got to look at all the fun and amazing animals there, and then we went to a muggle picture as well. We had to do it the day after my birthday because dad got gypped by his boss and had to work that day, but it all works. Mom didn't let me open your present until dad was there, either, so that's why this is coming today, but I can't help but repeat myself,

Thank you, Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!

I don't even know how you knew I wanted a new hat, and you got such a lovely one; it's amazing! And you hid inside it a bundle of candy! It dumped all over my head when I put it on, you brat!

Brother got me Quidditch pads, and Neville got me Quidditch Throughout the Ages for myself – it figures he'd get me a book – and mom and dad got me nice robes and Harry told me in his note I can have his old Nimbus because dad got him the Firebolt for his birthday. Your parents both gave me all the Standard Book of Spells that I'll need for school, and Sirius gave me a bunch of Zonko's stuff, and Remus sent me a note saying he'd tutor me in whatever I wanted over the summer. My birthday was excellent.

I'm sending you another hug, Melanie! The hat managed to match my nice robes! You didn't conspire with my parents, did you?

From,

Nanna

Nov. 25th

Dear Nanna,

What would you do to me if I said I had?

And Romilda is being a brat this week ...

January-February:

Jan. 7th

Dear Nanna,

You remember when I told you that your brother and Prince kept getting into fights? Well, your brother isn't the only person who apparently picks on him ... Malfoy got himself a detention for getting into a fight with Prince down the hall to the dungeons, by Snape himself. It's a possibility of favouritism, but the funny thing was, Harry

seemed inordinately pleased with the outcome. Apparently he likes Malfoy less than Prince.

Actually, your brother's been real weird all year. He's missed a few more classes other then just charms, and from what Neville's said, come in late to several others. He's also been cleaving unto the library like some Ravenclaw. His grades are getting better, but when have you known your brother to be that studious?

From,

Worried Melanie

Jan 12th

Dear Worried sister,

Actually, Harry can be really bookish if something catches his attention. He may just be looking something up, or it could be he's attacking Care of Magical Creatures with fervour. He's done that before. This year, he got three books on Magical Creatures, remember? One was from Hagrid, for the class he was taking. Bloody scary book, that was. It hid under my chair, and bit dad when he went after it. I didn't want to get down off my chair for a good while after they got it out; what if it bit me again, or if what bit dad hadn't been the book?

So, in other words it's not all that strange that Harry's being obsessive with the library. He does that sometimes. Maybe you could ask him what he's looking up. Just because Neville spends more time in the library, doesn't mean he's that much smarter than my brother.

From,

Sister to the Beast Boy

Jan. 18th

Dear Beast Girl,

I suppose he might be looking something up; he does need some help with his work during class. Neville has said he doesn't see Harry in the sections on schoolwork when he's up there finishing off his essays, but then again Harry isn't quite as dedicated to school as Neville is. Neville does get the better grades. Hermione seems to like him a lot. I'd almost suspect her of having a crush if she seemed less bookish. Then again, they're usually in the library together so ... I wouldn't be surprised if they made prefect in their year.

From,

Sister to the Good Student

Feb. 23rd

(On the bottom of a letter home from Harry, written by Neville)

I would like to add here that Melanie says she's sorry to Nanna for being an uppity brat and trying to compare me and Harry for some pointless reason I have yet to figure out. If she would send a short note, they can continue their correspondence, or choose to think each other enemies for one of the most ridiculous reasons I've come across in a long time.

Neville

I'd like to add to my little sister that arguing about my and Neville's academics has to fall under the category of ridiculous, and being angry for a long while about some petty reason is a very Slytherin thing to do, so if she'd like to be in the same house as me, she should probably calm down unless she wants to get more chances to hex Malfoy.

Harry

Feb. 25th

Dear Ms. Longbottom,

I would sincerely apologize for the presumption of betting Harry against Neville as who was smarter than whom. I realize now that they're both blunt males, and probably can argue fine amongst themselves for points of prowess.

Kindly accept my apologies,

From,

Ms. Potter

Feb 27th

Dear Ms. Potter.

Apology accepted.

I admit to fault of my own in worsening the argument and agree that if they wish to argue academics that is their own choice, and not one we need to bring up amongst ourselves.

Please, can I inquire as to what I have missed?

From,

Ms. Longbottom
Easter Holiday

Mar. 30th

Dear Nanna,

You won't believe this! You know how Hermione is horribly over-achieving in all her work? Neville finally bearded her on it, and you won't believe what she tried to do now! She was taking all of the classes offered for third years, and finally it apparently overwhelmed her, she missed Charms, and walked out of Divination. Neville made her fess up, and now she's stopped going to Divination and Muggle Studies. She was getting to all her classes with a time-turner! It's amazing, but she really couldn't handle it. Neville talked her into

dropping those and getting sleep in her spare time now, so everything should be alright. It's still absolutely amazing!

Oh, and Gryffindor's taking on Ravenclaw for the final match of the year. I'll tell you who won and everything afterwards, alright? And then it's final exams and home ... I'm looking forward to seeing you again. Next year you'll be at school with me! I'm so looking forward to it, we'll have to make sure to jump Harry and Neville big time ...

From,

Melanie

On to Fourth Year ...

A/N: Here is the third year interlude, and next week will be the beginning of fourth year, and once more a return to only one update per two weeks. I thank everyone you reviewed last chapter; it was very definitely appreciated. hands out chocolate Thank you again. I hope you like how the story's going, and look forward to hearing your responses and also look forward to starting posting fourth year ... It's a lot of fun, that. And after fourth year comes fifth ... But that's a ways off. I've got lots of chapters for fourth year, and lemme tell you already, it's finished and just waiting for all of you. Maybe if I start getting a spectacular review turn out I might be convinced to update a little more often ...

Thank you for reading my story!

Fire & Napalm

The Prince-Who-Lived

Chapter Thirteen

The Potter house was woken August 23, 1994, by one of its members galloping down the stairs and racing into the kitchen.

James Potter and his wife Lily both shared a smile that Harry did not miss as he came to the archway. He stuck out his handful of parchment tickets and stared at both of them before demanding,

“What are these? And why were they in my room?”

James smoothed his smile off his face. “What do they look like, Harry?”

Harry huffed. “Tickets. To the World Cup. You said they were sold out not two weeks ago! That’s why you said I didn’t get them for my birthday!”

James studied his fingernails with a small smile on his face. Harry frowned playfully. “You’ve had these for weeks longer than that, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.” James drawled.

Behind Harry, Nanna yawned loudly. Harry slipped aside and she walked into the kitchen to pull up a seat at the table. She was still wearing her nightgown, and a little disoriented. Harry calmed, and walked up behind her before holding the tickets in her range of vision, the title on them sticking out. She glanced over, and then did a double-take.

“No way! We’ve got tickets?” Nanna looked over at James with gleaming eyes. She then frowned. “You said they were sold out!” As soon as James took on an innocent expression, Nanna frowned. Harry quickly pulled the tickets to safety as she whipped out her Ebony and unicorn hair wand and sent a colour-changing spell at James. James hadn’t expected it, and shortly ending up with vomit

green robes. He spluttered in indignation, as the rest of the family laughed.

"James, you earned that one. You raised these kids. Did you expect them to take such deceit lying down?"

"Well, no." James admitted. "I just expected to have the confrontation somewhere other than the breakfast table."

Harry took his seat across from Nanna with a grin, his bowl already in front of him and a smile on his face. "And when did you expect the confrontation when you put the tickets underneath my glasses on my bedside table overnight?"

James pouted. "You weren't supposed to look." Harry just raised his eyebrow, and James laughed lightly. "You look so sneaky when you wear an expression like that, Harry. I sometimes wonder how much of myself you really inherited."

Harry quietly looked between his parents, and Lily smiled. "You look almost exactly like him when he would be arguing a prank with Sirius when you do that."

Harry nodded, and then looked back to his father. "Are Sirius and Remus coming as well? And what about the Longbottoms? Wait ..." Harry frowned tightly. "Neville got tickets for his birthday, even if he himself isn't going. He never said whom ..." James once more put on an innocent expression and Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking to you for the rest of breakfast."

James tried to look offended. He failed miserably.

III

The next day, Harry got together with Ron, Hermione, and Neville to talk excitedly about the plans they had for the Quidditch World Cup. Arthur had gotten tickets from Ludo Bagman, all of them seats in the Top Box. Harry good-naturedly ribbed him about their excellent spots, but Harry didn't mind too much: the tickets his family and the Longbottoms had were just below. Having his friends together

however, soon exhausted speculation about the World Cup and Harry smiled at them warmly.

"So, looking forward to the next school year?"

Ron laughed. "Can it get better than last year?"

Neville snorted. "Can't be worse than before then, at least. I hope the next teacher will equal Remus, though. He was really good."

"I hope Snape gets something rotten in his shoe for that." Ron grumbled. "Yapping about Remus like that. That was really unfair! Remus never did anything to him."

Harry coughed lightly. "Remus actually did a fair bit, Ron. Him and my dad and Sirius all did."

Ron looked at him curiously. Harry sighed.

"You know the Marauders? From Fred and George's talking?" Ron nodded slowly, a small smile gracing his lips. "My dad is Prongs, Sirius is Padfoot, and Remus is Moony. Remember?" Ron nodded again, and Harry glanced aside. "They picked on Snape a lot. Snape's got good reason to be grouchy. Although they've added Frank to their circle now ..."

Ron looked torn between agreeing with Harry and being amused at the thought of Snape being teased. Hermione, however, wasn't amused at all and neither was Neville. Harry just shrugged, and gave Hermione a small smile.

"So, no time-turner this year, 'Mione?"

Hermione sniffed as Ron and Neville grinned. "No, I'm not going to be using a time-turner this year, thank you." Her nose came down and she smiled lightly. "I learned my lesson last year."

Harry, Neville, and Ron laughed. Hermione had indeed. She had used a time-turner the year before to get to all the classes offered at Hogwarts. Over time, she'd slowly begun to panic and stress. Finally,

Neville had confronted her about it, as it was undeniable what she was doing: She was in all of their classes, and Harry, Ron, and Neville each took different electives, sharing only Arithmancy between Harry and Neville and Care of Magical Creatures between Harry and Ron. Around Easter, it became too much and she dropped Divination and Muggle Studies, returning to a manageable number of classes, much to the boys' relief.

Despite the time-turner issue, the last year had been a great one, and very relaxing. Beneath all of their noses, however, Harry had slowly and surely solidified his friendship with Alan Prince, Severus Snape's son. It had been a glorious year indeed.

Lily hollered for each of them to come back inside, and they readily complied. That evening was going to be dinner at the Weasleys, something no one who had ever heard of Mrs. Weasley's cooking would miss. It was one sure way to get teenage boys to move in good time.

||||

The next day could not dawn soon enough. Harry and Nanna both insisted they show up early in the morning, waking at six o'clock and, through no encouragement from Harry at all, Nanna immediately jumped both their parents in their bedroom. It was a grouchy James and Lily who came downstairs that morning and sent token glares their son's way, who merely looked at them with an expression as bland as milk as he offered them some of the porridge he'd made. They took it gratefully, James with a heavy sigh.

"And I was looking forward to sleeping in this morning."

Harry grinned. "With a Quidditch happy eleven-year-old daughter? I don't think so."

"And I'm sure the 'Seeker son' had nothing to do with her jumping on us this morning at all." Lily observed.

"Funny thing that," Harry said through a mouthful. He swallowed. "I really did have nothing to do with that."

"He didn't do anything, mum, I wanted you up myself." Nanna chimed in. "He certainly wasn't deterring me, though, and he immediately offered to make breakfast after I woke up him up. I think he was already up, though, when I came in on him. He was in the bathroom."

Harry pinked slightly. Yes, he had been awake when Nanna came in. Fortunately for his little sister, he'd been in the bathroom with a locked door when she had. Puberty had hit, and he'd grown to an almost respectable height, but there were several other parts to male puberty and he'd been taking care of one of them. Harry elbowed his sister, and then stuck out his tongue. She returned the favour and went back to her meal as James chuckled and Lily smiled fondly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"So, when are we going? We've got a camping spot, right? And it's muggle clothes; you're both already dressed, I see." He asked, diverting the conversation from himself. His parents were dressed, his mother and father both in loose shirts and trousers. Lily must have dressed James for him to be so reasonable. He and Nanna both knew how to dress themselves, Nanna in a cute jumper, and himself dressed much like his parents.

James nodded. "We'll be leaving when the Longbottoms, Sirius and Remus arrive. The campsite is for all of us together, and of course your mother did a wonderful job on clothes." James leaned to peck Lily on the cheek, who rolled her eyes. "We'll be apparating, and taking you kids all side-along. Sirius and Remus should be showing up soon, and the Longbottoms should be arriving any time now by floo."

Harry and Nanna both brightened, and moved through their breakfasts. Harry excused himself to go check his daypack. Everything for the day was already in there, but he double-checked it, and then pulled open his drawer and removed the fake bottom. Beneath that was a small pile of letters. Harry pulled out the most recent, and double-checked the last paragraph.

The school had a raffle for tickets to the World Cup, a competition between the Sorcerer's School and the Witches Academy. Green got

one, and the Alfaerus already had theirs. Geoffrey made sure we all had tickets, so I'll be there for the cup. We're going to be on the far park. They can't keep the two Salem schools near each other; they'd cause enough sparks to make muggles aware ten miles out. My godfather is having a hissy fit that he can't go, but it's completely reasonable that he can't. However, I managed to talk my father into coming with us. All I really had to do was mention Green and he started getting worried. After their fight over the basilisk, I think Green is rather wary of him; so bringing that up made up his mind to come with us. We should be in the seats below the top box, towards the front. I hope you'll be there too.

Alan Prince

Harry smiled. He and Alan didn't write often, just about once or twice a summer. Alan was working on talking Geoffrey into getting him two-way mirrors, but Geoffrey had insisted on trying to 'improve' upon the current enchantments much like he had on Alan's Firebolt. Alan was still getting on Geoffrey's case about getting the Firebolt, his 13th birthday gift, back. The man was incorrigible, but Alan still sang his praises when talking about his childhood. Harry supposed that was what was important. In Alan's situation, where so many things could have gone wrong, it was amazing that so much had gone right.

Noise rose downstairs, and Harry quickly returned to letter to its partners in the hidden drawer. There was a total of four letters; Alan and him only sort of stayed in contact over the summer. He'd already sent his return letter to Alan, so he'd hear from him next either at the World Cup or Hogwarts. Quickly, Harry returned the false bottom and grabbed his bag, rumbling down the stairs as Sirius raised his voice to wonder just where his godson was. Rounding the corner brought him directly into view.

"Ah, there's the little twerp. Harry, you almost held us up."

"Sorry, there was something I was sure I was missing so I had to check." The lie was easy after spending most of last year frustrating Alan while learning the more subtle arts of speech. "I was wrong, though. So, who's taking whom? We're doing side-along, right?"

Sirius grinned and slung his arm over Harry's shoulders. "I get to side-along you, prongslet." Harry rolled his eyes. He hated that nickname. Sirius didn't notice. "Everyone else is distributed. Oy, James. Everything together?"

A look around the room proved it ready. Everyone had miraculously managed reasonable clothing likely due to Lily's influence, even though Sirius was rather gaudy in his Halloween choice of colours. As for apparition, Frank had Neville; Alice, Melanie. Remus had hold of Connor, with James holding Nanna and Lily was apparating alone. James nodded, and counted down. Harry tucked tight against Sirius. Side-along wasn't the greatest feeling in the world, and he was always nervous.

"Five," Frank popped away, "Four," Remus went, "Three –"

Harry felt squeezed on all sides, an uncomfortably tight sensation that held until he almost couldn't stand it anymore and then, with a faint sound, it was gone. Harry stumbled slightly in stepping back, and then swore under his breath, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes.

"I hate apparition." Harry griped. Sirius just grinned.

"It's not that great, but it is very useful."

"Whatever." Harry returned his glasses and glanced around the small wood they'd appeared in. "Where's the others? Sirius, did you get us lost?"

A glance up proved that to be very likely. Sirius looked rather trapped and was muttering under his breath. Harry glowered lightly at him and looked around himself, finding nothing more interesting than a lot of woods. Finally, he heard a faint strain of conversation.

"Hey, there's someone talking over there." Harry pointed. Sirius followed his finger and listened.

"Good listening, prongslet." Sirius said. "I missed that. Lets go see where we are."

Harry frowned, and muttered something disparaging about Sirius' skill as an auror. They approached, and Harry was relieved to note that whoever was speaking was speaking English. Trying to communicate with someone non-English with Sirius hanging around wouldn't be cool. Finally, they came into view and Harry fought a wry smile off his face. They were looking at the back of a scruffy looking, brown-haired man who spoke with an American accent. Harry recognized him from second-year, and he also recognized the dirty-blonde man he was talking with. Curious about why there were out in the apparent middle of nowhere, Harry coughed slightly and stepped in front of Sirius.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The scruffy man turned, and Harry bit back a smile as it was confirmed he was indeed Geoffrey Alfaerus. He, however, apparently didn't care for recognizing Harry, and only gave them an annoyed glance before speaking up.

"Do you have any idea where we are?"

Harry could've beaten his head against a tree. Sirius sighed.

"We were hoping to ask you that."

Green threw his hands in the air, and pulled his wand. "Point me, Ginger."

The wand spun and stopped, aiming straight off to the right. Geoffrey stared at Green.

"Why didn't you do that ten minutes ago?"

Green flushed. "I wasn't thinking. You never did it either."

Geoffrey muttered something that involved cauldrons and wands in a non-sanctioned combination. "The man high on mercury and lead has a working brain. We also never thought to check our coordinates, nor to move up a tree to check the surroundings outside the forest." Geoffrey dragged Green along in the direction the wand was pointing. Having no real other choice, Harry and Sirius followed. After several

minutes, Harry knew a lot more about Point Me charms - such as the incantation, parameters, limits, and variants - and the different poisonous gases that could affect thought than he had previous to it, and they finally arrived at the campsite. Harry was glad for a muggle-born mother. Most of the other wizards had made an absolute botch of dressing muggle-style. Even Sirius' Halloween look of orange and black looked reasonable next to a wizard in striped green trousers and a spotted nightgown, which was the one that immediately found them and glared.

"You four were the nuts who apparated out of the area, aren't you? You're nearly breaking laws with that! Did anyone see you, and give me your names. You're holding everything up; we were half-afraid to have to send people searching for you already."

Sirius drew himself up in indignation, but Geoffrey snorted. "Get off it already; after apparating across that giant puddle, I think a difference of less than a mile is damn right on target. I'm Geoffrey Alfaerus, and if you'll excuse me, we need to be getting back to our group." Geoffrey gave Sirius a small nod and brushed straight past the official. Harry fought not to laugh, as the man spluttered and turned on Sirius.

"Sirius Black, with Harry Potter." Sirius introduced them. Harry supposed belonging to the ministry meant he should respect its parameters, so he couldn't get away with pulling out shock value. Not a lot of wizards could apparate between countries, much less all the way across the Atlantic. Sirius' was just a silly mistake. "And there was no one in the general vicinity of where we arrived save Mr. Alfaerus there. Definitely no muggles."

The official huffed and growled, but quickly turned away at another shout. "Alright fine, you're with the rest of the Potters and such. Go find them yourselves and you'll be right in there with your campsite."

Sirius nodded, and the ministry man left, scurrying off to pester someone else. Sirius sighed, glanced around, and pulled his wand, casting a discrete spell. The wand spun, and then pointed straight into the massive hubbub. Sirius grinned. "Prongs is that way, pup. Let's go."

Harry nodded slowly and followed Sirius into the crowd. And it was very crowded. People were passing them on all sides, and Harry saw more wizards than he'd ever run into before in his life. It was worse than walking through the ministry in the middle of the day. There seemed to be random languages being bandied about, and people dressed in everything from undeniable robes to nightgowns, to plus-fours and galoshes to one woman in a wedding dress complete with train. Passing a water spigot, Harry stopped Sirius and ran over to Ron and Hermione, standing in place behind an old man in a flowery woman's nightdress, and ministry wizard with trousers in hand stalking away furiously.

"Hey, good to see you." Harry called.

Ron looked up and smiled. "Hey there mate. You just arrive?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Sirius got lost in apparition so we arrived where we shouldn't have. How are you Hermione?"

Hermione beamed. "It's amazing being here, Harry. Bill and Charlie are even in to see the Cup as well, and we took a portkey in. Did you say you apparaeted?"

"Side-along, with Sirius. He got lost." Harry shot an amused grin Sirius' direction, who merely brushed him off and glanced around at the area. "Curious about the mechanics, Hermione?" Harry teased. Hermione stuck her tongue out at him, and stepped up to the tap to fill the kettle in her hands. "Is Mr. Weasley insisting on doing everything the 'muggle way'?"

Ron groaned. "Absolutely everything, Harry. From fetching water, to pitching the tents, and probably cooking too. How are you going to be doing things?"

"Ron," Harry began, smiling lightly, "I've got the Marauders. Sirius, Remus, my dad, and Frank. What do you think is going to happen?"

Ron didn't get a chance to finish as a blond boy suddenly burst out of a group just behind Sirius and nearly bowled the older man over.

Both staggered dangerously, and the blonde let Sirius go before he had regained his balance.

"You stop running with that, Andrew, before I pull your teeth! That letter is goddamn private, you flea-ridden parasite!"

The scream came from farther back, and only made the blonde laugh harder. He moved to continue running, but Harry quickly tripped him as he passed, and grabbed his arm on the way down, trapping him down. Shortly thereafter, Harry was surprised to see Alan race in and, finding Andrew pinned, immediately ran up and pinned him beside Harry, grabbing the arm Harry had, and pulling it roughly up.

"Let - go." He growled.

"It's just a letter, Alan, you're having a fit over a letter? Hogwarts girlfriend, then? Ye-ouch! Alan, ouch!" He griped. Alan had shifted his weight from being fully on Andrew's chest, which made how Andrew was breathing a good question, to being closer to his left shoulder, the arm holding the letter, and had furthered pressure on it. "Fine, fine, give, give. Take the letter already. Not worth a dislocated shoulder, it ain't."

Alan snatched the letter up, and leapt lightly up, still glaring dangerously at Andrew. Harry noticed they were nearly the same height, with Alan having finally hit puberty later than he himself had, and Andrew apparently slightly ahead of him. Both were thin, but Alan was getting gangly while Andrew looked merely lithe. There seemed to a strange quality to Andrew's motions, but he merely smirked and raced back the way they'd come without waiting for any other signal. Alan began to grumble under his breath, something about boys and parents and far too many similarities before he shoved the letter into his pocket, and gave Harry a wry smirk. Harry returned it with a mocking bow.

"What a surprise seeing you here, Prince." Harry answered. "Had I known that was your letter I never would have stopped him."

"It was lucky chance you managed it to begin with Potter." Alan returned. His eyes flashed dangerously, and he gave a mocking bow

in return. “He’s definitely more of a challenge than you are. Are you rooting for Ireland or Bulgaria?”

“Ireland, of course.” Harry drawled, inspecting his nails. “Bulgaria’s only got Krum worth anything.”

“Fancy that.” Alan sounded disgusted. “If Bulgaria wasn’t so terrible I’d be inclined to switch. Let’s hope your cheering doesn’t bring down the fervour of my Irish, hm?” Alan turned and stalked off, and Harry took every ounce of control he had to look irritated. All of last year, they’d cultivated their apparent rivalry, and Harry had gotten a lot of practice for their public encounters. Now, it was a strange game of seeing how much meaning they could insert into a display, and then maintain it afterwards for the rest of their friends. Harry knew he had succeeded. Even Neville, who had suspected the beginnings of respect between them second year, was now thoroughly convinced Harry and Alan were at each other’s throats in the most pleasant of manners. Their rivalry had slowly begun to rival Alan and Malfoy’s. Sirius walked over as Alan left and snorted.

“What a twat.” He grumbled. Hermione glared at Sirius, but he ignored her. “Well Harry, I’d suspect your father is going to skin me alive for getting lost by now, so we should move along. From what I remember, you’ve got seats just below them, and once we’re set up you can wander again.”

Harry nodded and bid Hermione and Ron goodbye before following Sirius into the crowd once more. They passed more different language groups, and slipped by a few arguments between ministry officials and blatant magic use and finally Sirius’ wand slipped slightly to follow James’ movements and Harry found himself faced with his family and one irate mother. When Lily saw Harry and Sirius she ran over immediately and pulled Harry into a hug while glaring at Sirius at the same time.

“What kind of overgrown buffoon are you, Sirius? You can’t even manage to apparate properly and you get yourself in trouble all the time. We’ve been here for a half-hour and you don’t even show up. What did you do, get off target by a mile or more? You can do that

when you're alone, but Merlin save you if you do that with Harry again."

"Mum," Harry spoke, "I did delay him a little when I saw Ron and Hermione so that I could go say hi." Lily's eyebrows relaxed minutely and Sirius looked slightly more relaxed. "However that was only about five minutes. He really did miss his target by a lot." Lily's glare returned to Sirius, and Harry slipped away with a roguish grin.

As Lily lit into Sirius once more, Harry darted over to greet his father and look at the tents they'd set up. There were three tents, one for the adults, one for the boys, and one for the girls. They looked like decent looking tents from the outside, two single tents and one that might have fit three, but a glance inside showed what resembled an open, single room flat with a small bathroom in the two single tents and a sturdy, one bedroom flat with kitchen in the adult's tent. There would be a fairly tight squeeze, but nothing too bad. It was only for a single night anyways. For the World Cup, Harry would've slept out in the open. Slipping his head into the boy's tent, Harry found Neville already inside, a book on his knees and his daypack by his side. Harry strolled over and pulled up a seat next to him.

"Howdy." He offered. Neville barely looked up from his book to wave slightly. A glance showed the title to be 'Herbology and Potions' and the book to be at least a few hundred pages thick. Amused, Harry quickly slipped it from Neville's grasp, checked there was a bookmark in place, and then shut it and slid it across the hardwood floor to the wall. Neville yelped.

"Harry, that was my birthday gift!"

"From who, Hermione?"

"Yes!" Neville grumbled. "She'll kill you for tossing it around, once I'm through with you. You don't throw books!"

Harry raised his hands in defence. "I didn't throw it, I slid it! It hardly hit the wall with any force. What on earth are you doing reading when we're at the World Cup anyways? This is huge, Neville! And you're reading a Potions text?"

Neville ground his teeth. "Harry, you know better than everyone else that I have never been very interested in Quidditch. In fact, the only reason I'm coming is because Arthur got tickets for two extra people." His tone did a complete flip, "I actually wanted to talk to you about that, Harry."

Harry blinked, and pulled his legs crosswise. "I'm listening."

"I don't want the top box. Do you want to sit up there with Ron and Hermione while I take your seat? Cause I'm really not interested and I'd rather sit with my parents, honestly."

Harry chewed his lip. The top box would mean being up there when the teams finished, and sitting with his friends, and having the best seats. But it would also mean sitting with the Malfoys and the minister.

"I don't know. I'll have to ask my parents, but maybe."

Neville gave him a small smile. "Alright. I knew you'd like it."

Harry cuffed him gently on the shoulder, and stood. "Well, I plan on taking a walkabout. You coming with, or just going to sit and read?"

Neville raised his eyebrow at Harry and Harry laughed before ducking back out of the tent. On the front lawn, Harry was surprised to find Geoffrey Alfaerus, Alan, the blonde Andrew, and several others including Green talking with his parents. Alan gave Harry a short glance, and then turned back to looking bored. Harry approached, and heard his father talking warmly with Geoffrey.

"- It would be an honour, really. I'm surprised; not a lot of people tend to be that curious about our aurors, much less really want to ask about what sort of tactics and such we use. Have you been here in Britain often, or what?"

"I'm just curious." Geoffrey offered. "It's slightly related to Alan, my charge, but otherwise it's idle curiosity. Alan was born here, before he came to me."

Alan rolled his eyes again, and spoke up. "Geoffrey, as curious as you are, I'm not. Can I take Andrew and go find something else to do?"

Geoffrey waved a negligent hand his direction, and Alan left. Harry watched his direction for a moment before turning back to the crowd around Geoffrey. They were all pulling up seats around the merry little fire his dad had going, and Harry walked over during the introductions and stood behind Sirius' shoulder. Of their group, Sirius, Harry's father, Frank, Alice and Lily were all seated there, with Remus very possibly in his tent. This was proved when Remus stepped out and joined them. In front of Alice were Connor and behind the group, Melanie and Nanna were playing with dolls, both of them wearing their wands, Nanna's on a cord Harry knew was tucked under her shirt, and Melanie's hanging in a makeshift holster on her waist.

Harry turned back to pay attention as he heard several names. Apparently they were all from Salem Sorcerer's Academy, the male equivalent to the Salem Witch's Institute. Present were Geoffrey, his older brother Freyr, and two of a set of triplets, the Quintelyuvs, of whom Green was the youngest and who apparently was not actually named Green. Hearing his real name, Telesphore, Harry wasn't surprised he used Green instead, although where Green was drawn from was still unknown. They also could apparently talk tactics, strategy, and technical details as well as his parents, as not a minute into the conversation Harry was lost. Tapping Sirius on the shoulder, and gathering the attention of the whole crowd, Harry leaned to ask his dad if he could go walk around. James smiled and nodded, but stopped him from leaving immediately.

"I'd just like to introduce my son, Harry. He's fourteen, a Gryffindor at Hogwarts."

Geoffrey smiled warmly and nodded to Harry. "Indeed. I remember meeting him Alan's second year." Green nodded to that as well. However, the reminder of Alan made Sirius and James slightly uncomfortable, remembering Harry and Alan's apparent rivalry. Harry solved the issue and nodded slowly, slipping off from the campsite to walk around the many other tents, and purposefully following the

same way he'd seen Alan leave. He passed through several groups of people, and finally, in among several students Harry thought might be from Beauxbatons but couldn't be sure, Harry found Andrew, preening and smiling flirtatiously, and on the outskirts was Alan, leaned up against a tree and watching with a bemused expression. Harry approached him sidelong, watching Andrew cautiously. Alan noticed him without any indication and spoke up.

"He's always flirting with everything with a pulse, Andrew is." He drawled. "But he can keep a secret even through threat of bodily harm. Then again," Alan tilted his head and smiled lightly, "that would mean little to him considering that he's not really alive to begin with."

"Pardon?" Harry asked, dead curious about that phrase.

"Andrew's a vampire. Don't ask for the explanation; you wouldn't be able to see straight even by the time the game started if I tried explaining. Even I don't follow it that well. How's your summer been?"

"Good." Harry said with a smile. "Better than I expected. You got my letter?"

"That was the one Andrew ran off with. He was convinced 'Harry' was short for 'Harriet' and it was from a girlfriend." Alan growled. "Brat can't seem to think with the proper end half the time. And when he does you can't really tell save that he uses more words to say the same things."

"Sounds like the makings of a perfect friendship." Harry innocently returned. Alan snorted. Andrew glanced out from the circle of girls and then made a very low, very fancy bow before smiling brightly and leaving the circle, walking off down another path. Alan stood and followed, Harry circling around the back of the tree to tag along. If Alan trusted Andrew, Harry did. They caught up with him in short order, and Andrew looked between them curiously before smirking down at Harry.

"Nice job tripping me. Hadn't thought you'd do that, so I went straight into the dirt. Good hold, too."

Harry smiled back at him, thinking Andrew seemed damn odd even if he did have that undead excuse. The questions that came to mind made his head spin.

Andrew apparently was used to this, though, and he just smiled playfully. "Just don't think about it." Andrew offered. "Chances are half of what you think is wrong and the rest is just not-quite-right."

Harry nodded, and stuck out his hand. "Harry Potter."

Andrew blinked and did a double take before looking over at Alan. "I never thought you'd play that side."

Harry heard a soft clink of metal on metal. Harry could just see Alan with his hand in his pocket, which unfortunately reminded Harry of Alan's habit of keeping his guns there. He tried not to think too hard on it. Alan spared him the effort.

"My godfather gave me a real pistol this year, Andrew, and undead or not it will not be pretty if I shoot you with it. I am not a nymphomaniac like you, and so please stop assuming such. Just because you feel gypped that I'm not available ..."

Harry fought down his nervousness and let himself laugh at Andrew's rather interesting expression. He looked torn between amusement, worry, and disappointment and apparently none won out on the others. After a little while, Alan removed his hand from his pocket and Andrew relaxed. Alan continued speaking.

"Velorian hanging about?"

Andrew shrugged and chuckled. "Once he wakes up, maybe." Alan gave him a curious look. "Mom just announced she's pregnant. Dad freaked out, panicked, and then didn't seem to be able to form a coherent sentence. He settled for hugging her tightly and causing all the people around them to stare before he dragged her into their tent. No one else was really interested in following."

Harry laughed right along with Alan, and snorted. "I think not a lot of people would've followed that sort of thing."

Andrew rolled his eyes good-naturedly and their walking took them towards another patch of tents. Harry stopped walking, and Alan turned to face him.

“Where are you sitting?” He asked pleasantly.

“Either in the area right below the top box, or possibly inside the top box.”

Andrew whined, “Lucky. I want to sit in the top box.”

“The minister would have a hissy, Andrew,” Alan sneered.

Andrew returned with a distinctly predatory grin. “That’s half the fun.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And where are you guys sitting?”

“Right below the top box as well, probably the row ahead or behind you guys.” Alan returned. “Why might you be able to get into the top box?”

“My friends got their tickets directly from Ludo Bagman. They have one more seat than they need. Neville hadn’t wanted to bother coming at first, but because of that extra seat, he agreed because otherwise he’d be really bored at home. He just didn’t want his parents to spend money on something he wasn’t that interested in. Anyways, he doesn’t care for being up there, so he offered me that seat while he would sit down with our parents.”

“Definitely sit up there.” Andrew assured him. “You get all the good sights, and then the teams have to walk in front of you. It’ll be great!” Andrew smiled, and Harry couldn’t help but notice his canine teeth. Apparently he stared a moment too long because Andrew laughed and Harry truly stared as not his canines, but the teeth in front of them suddenly sharpened and lengthened into fangs. The teeth disappeared so fast Harry wasn’t sure if they’d been there to begin with. “Something tells me vampires aren’t all that common over here.” Andrew drawled, smiling in some morbid amusement. Harry shook his head and looked over at the tents before sighing softly.

"I suppose I should be getting on my way. It's been nice talking to you, Alan. Nice meeting you Andrew." Harry smiled.

Alan nodded slowly. "Nice chatting with you too."

Andrew gave him another look-over that made Harry want to start walking right then, and then smiled slowly as Harry fought the urge. "Nice meeting you as well, Harry." The tone made several more suggestions than Harry wanted, and he simply nodded curtly and left. Behind him, he heard Alan speak despairingly to Andrew about his libido, resulting in a warm laugh. Harry smiled faintly. It was always so nice to talk to Alan. Everything just seemed to make sense.

A/N: Well, here's the beginning of fourth year. I hope you like it! Next chapter in two weeks, unless I'm inundated with reviews to do otherwise. Thank you to the one review the little interlude got, and I hope to hear from more of you all! See you on the first of November, then.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fourteen

Harry slowly wandered his way back towards his parents tent, passing through several groups of people, some waving brightly to every passer-by, others talking in tightly knit groups. Harry just smiled slowly and strolled casually through the paths between. As he walked, he finally passed a cluster of tents with a flag overtop reading 'Salem Sorcerer's School'. Beneath the flag flew a smaller American flag, and then, at the bottom, there were several people seated in folding chairs, talking together. Just further along, Geoffrey and his friends who had been talking to Harry's parents last he'd seen, were approaching. Geoffrey gave him a small smile before joining the others at the base of the flagpole.

"Feeling better yet, Velorian?" Geoffrey asked. A dirty blonde nodded lightly, and leaned back. He looked a lot younger than Harry's parents, and had a grin that strongly reminded Harry of Sirius when he was planning something.

"Quite, thank you." His grin became slightly goofy. "I'm going to have another kid."

"Hopefully with several times less drama than your last one," Amaranth, the brown-haired man who'd been introduced as Green's brother, asked with a seeming lack of attention. Velorian nodded anyways, and Harry was almost out of earshot when he answered.

"Most certainly. Having one kid from vampire politics is enough for me. I just hope Andrew is happy to have a little sibling."

Harry tripped and paused before forcing himself to keep walking. That was Andrew's dad? He didn't look old enough to have a fourteen-year-old son! Harry wasn't watching where he was going, and rather suddenly he ran into someone. Harry stepped back and quickly apologized.

"Sorry sir, I wasn't looking." Harry glanced up and froze. He was looking straight at Severus Snape, who frowned tightly down at him.

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you should exercise a little more caution in the future so as not to offend someone more than you already have." Snape snapped. "You seem a little more like your father every year, so please be wary. He's offended enough that you might need more than a name to keep yourself safe."

Harry nodded without speaking and left swiftly before his face betrayed him. His departure left Severus watching him with interest at the lack of retaliation. Harry, however, was more concerned with controlling his anger. He was not like his father. He didn't hate people for no reason, he didn't discriminate against what he didn't understand, and he most certainly was not a bully. His father did have redeeming traits – drive, honour, conviction – but that didn't make his faults any less in the eyes of his son. Harry was determined to never have those failings.

Harry continued back to his parents' tents and passed several salesmen on the way, hawking their wares to the others. The stuff wasn't blatantly magical quite yet, but it was getting closer, with more and more wizards furtively trying magic. Once back, he found that his parents were gone, and so Harry continued on his wandering, fingering his serpent necklace and the key that would warn his parents were his life endangered. He'd been inordinately pleased when this one had lasted the year.

He wandered through several different areas before pausing when he found Salem Witches' Institute. He stopped for a few moments, and a kind faced woman strolled over.

"Hello son. You're looking right out of place. You looking for someone?"

Harry paused, and then gave a small smile. "Yes, my parents. But I'm curious ... The Salem Sorcerer's School is all the way across the campground, but ..." He was sure Alan had mentioned it, but couldn't remember.

Several women behind laughed and the woman who's spoken to him gave him a wry grin. "The school's are far apart because as well as the alumni might personally get along, we're still rival schools.

Goodness knows my husband is over there, but get him in a professional capacity and we're immediately at logger-heads."

Harry gave the light-haired woman a second glance with a curious expression and she smiled. "I'm married to Geoffrey Alfaerus."

"Oh!" Harry mouthed. This was Alan's biological aunt, then. They looked nothing like each other. "Nice to meet you." He gave her a small smile, and she waved him along his way. Harry left amused; Geoffrey's wife seemed as spunky as he was. It was surprising, though, that Alan's aunt was so blonde. He couldn't find a single distinct resemblance between them.

Finally he came across the Weasley's tents. Harry's parents, the Longbottoms, Sirius and Remus were all there sitting with Arthur Weasley and his sons. Ron and Neville both waved as he approached and James smiled.

"Hey Harry, I hope you didn't worry."

"No, I thought you'd head over here." Harry reassured him. "Just got a good look around the camp, though. There are a lot of people here."

Neville and Ron laughed, and then Arthur coughed.

"Harry, Neville has said he doesn't want to sit in the top box. Would you like to take his seat up there?"

Harry blinked, and looked quietly at his parents. "May I?"

James laughed. "Merlin, of course you can, Harry. I'd give anything to have a seat up there. I'm not about to say no." Lily nodded along with him, and Harry broke into a wide grin before grabbing Ron's hand and laughing.

"So I get the seat next to you, Ronnikins. Hey, look. The vendors are over here."

Indeed, one of the vendors had just apparated near their camp, and smiled over at them brightly before starting in on her wares. Harry stood with Ron, Hermione, and Neville and quickly strolled over and looked through the wares. There were hats, and flags and figurines and Ron bought a talking rosette and a dancing shamrock hat in addition to a small walking figure of Krum. Harry laughed, and enjoyed looking, but didn't buy anything and neither did Neville nor Hermione. However, they soon found a vendor selling brass binoculars covered in many strange knobs and dials that turned out to be omnioculars. Ron looked at them hungrily. Harry rolled his eyes and fingered his pocket money. He had quite a bit; he hadn't bought anything for a while, and, once he glanced at Neville, Harry turned to the vendor.

"Four pair."

The woman blinked, and then smiled very warmly as she handed them over. Harry pulled out most of his money and then waited for Neville to hand over his twenty before paying the woman and thrusting a pair at Ron. Neville handed one to Hermione and Harry quickly returned to the camp, apparently deaf to Ron's protestations. Finally, Harry tired of his arguments, turned and gave him a firm stare.

"Consider it an early Christmas present and I just won't get you one then, alright? Am I not allowed to do things just because you're my friend? You're not going to talk me out of it, so make sure you get good use of it."

Before Ron could continue, Harry had turned around again, and a large gong echoed through the woods. Harry grinned, and Ron stopped griping to stare towards the pathway in awe. Neville clapped Harry on the shoulder and moved to stand with his parents; James gave Harry a warm smile and a thumbs up. Harry caught up with Mr. Weasley and followed him. The match would soon begin.

At the far end of the lantern lit trail, Harry stared and grinned at the gigantic gold stadium. He could hardly imagine that he would be inside it soon, and sitting right up at the very top. The ministry witch told them to go clean to the top and they climbed just ahead of

Harry's parents and the Longbottoms. As they reached the top, Neville called to Harry,

"Enjoy the match!"

Harry turned and saluted him before continuing up to the small box on the top of the pitch, exactly between the two goalposts. Below him, and all across the bowl, hundreds of thousands of witches and wizards settled themselves around the pitch. Harry stood right at the rail and smiled stupidly. Hermione stepped up beside him and sighed.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it? I never really imagined there were quite this many magical people in the world."

"I've lived magical my whole life," Harry admitted, "and it still amazes me to see this many magical people in one area. It's ... both kind of humbling and frightening."

"Frightening?"

Harry shrugged. "This is representative of our whole world. We can easily fit this representation into a gigantic dome that is still easily hid from muggles. We're still ..." Harry shook his head. "It's silly."

"Not really." Hermione murmured. "I see what you mean, but still ... we're very close knit, though. Certainly."

"We are that." Harry grinned. Harry turned and bowed Hermione to the chairs behind them, where two on the end were waiting for him and Hermione. "Which seat do you want, my lady?"

Hermione giggled and delicately took the seat in front of a small, terrified house elf. Harry hardly noticed it as he sat down, but Hermione turned and gave it a short look.

"What's this?" She asked.

The tiny house elf didn't react, but Harry glanced over and frowned. "It's someone's house elf. Probably saving their seat."

"A house elf?"

"They're magical creatures, usually indentured to a family and they do the housework. Absolutely love housework, they do. Nothing makes them happier. 'Course, some people treat them like dirt, and I'm sure Malfoy kicks his around with impunity, but what can you do?"

"They're indentured?" Hermione asked. "Do they get freed, ever?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Not usually. I suppose if you want to get more technical they're considered property, but then again, they likely can't imagine any other life."

"That's so cruel!" Hermione exclaimed. Harry glanced over in surprise, and found himself faced with Hermione's outraged face. "They're thinking beings, aren't they? Why are they treated so badly?"

Harry felt slightly awkward, but still shrugged, speaking under his breath and for her alone. "Hermione, you're talking about a government that classifies vampires and werewolves as animals and only part-human, never mind that they can still think completely normally and function with a few limitations due to being infected with a chronic virus. Do you really think they'd care about something that never was human or 'higher-order' in the first place?" The sarcasm on 'higher-order' was particularly biting.

Hermione's mouth worked and she stared, totally surprised, at Harry. Harry shrugged, and then tapped his finger to his mouth. She got the message; that wasn't something to bring up in public. Her face still retained its ugly cast, though, and Harry hoped the Quidditch would distract her soon. Ron was currently occupying himself with his omnioculars and staring at some poor bloke across the stadium. Hermione finally huffed and pulled out her program, reading out,

"A display from the team mascots will precede the match."

Mr. Weasley smiled. "That's always worth watching. Each team brings a creature native to their land to put on that show."

The box began to fill with many important people. Arthur greeted many of them, and Percy jumped up out of his seat so much Harry thought the twins must have done something to him. Finally, when Minister Fudge came in Percy jumped up and bowed so low his glasses fell from his face and shattered. He repaired them and picked them up red-faced before sitting, and Minister Fudge immediately beamed upon seeing Harry there. Harry squirmed awkwardly. His father had made no public or private secret of his opinion of Fudge, and Harry wasn't inclined to disagree. However, he shook hands with the man with a false smile that would have made Alan proud, and then, once Fudge had turned away, wiped his hand vigorously on his trousers. Hermione laughed quietly, and then Fudge looked back his way and Harry just about wanted to smack him one.

"Do you know the Potters? Potters, James Potter, the auror?" Fudge said loudly to the man behind him. "Oh, good grief. I don't know anything of his language." Harry gathered this was the Bulgarian minister, and nodded politely, stifling his disgust at Fudge. When Fudge turned and exclaimed the Malfoys had arrived, Harry muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath. He swore the Bulgarian minister smiled.

"And I'm sure you know Arthur." Fudge exclaimed. Harry looked up and wished he hadn't; Lucius' unpleasant expression was always hard to look at. He gave him a meaningless smile, and fought to keep his face straight as Lucius whispered an insult to Arthur.

"Good lord Arthur, what did you have to sell to get seats in the top box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Harry was grateful he was so close to Lucius; his return whisper went unnoticed by Arthur, "They were cheaper than the amount of bootlicking you paid."

Lucius' expression made his anger plain, but Fudge was paying him attention once more, announcing Lucius' exceeding generosity. "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

Harry shrugged. His parents made yearly donations, and they'd never gotten an invite, but then again Fudge knew they wouldn't accept. Harry gave Lucius a vicious smirk as he looked over his way and Harry's eyes flashed when he recognized the look that crossed Lucius' face as he looked at Hermione. Harry grinned suddenly.

"Mr. Malfoy, I'd like to introduce my friend and the best witch in Hogwarts, Hermione Granger." Harry gave his best public smile and gently indicated Hermione, who blushed, and then gave Lucius a tremulous smile. Harry gently touched her knee and the smile firmed as Lucius fought to keep his dislike from his face. He barely nodded to her; something Harry noted the Bulgarian minister look at with suspicion. Harry watched him leave and made a face.

"As if she didn't even exist. Fudge is such a moron."

"Harry," Hermione quietly asked, "You really didn't have to introduce me. Why?"

"Because it shouldn't be so bloody simple to dismiss someone without magical family. I got introduced to the Bulgarian Minister. Arthur got introduced to Mr. Malfoy. You? You apparently don't even exist in their minds because your muggle-born, never mind that you're sitting right there." Harry pouted. "I hate this government."

Ron and Arthur both shot Harry quelling looks, and Hermione quickly asked another question, "Do you really think I'm the best witch in Hogwarts?"

Harry looked at her with surprise, and Ron rolled his eyes. "Hermione, you're certainly the smartest witch in our year. All Lucius needs to remember is that you always beat out little Malfoy in academics."

Hermione winced. "Something tells me you really don't like the Malfoy's."

Harry shrugged, an ugly cast to his face. "He's a blood-purist." His tone resembled Malfoy's when speaking of muggleborns. "Do I need more reason?"

Hermione didn't answer. Ludo Bagman burst into the top box in the next moment, and looked around.

"Everyone ready?" He practically bounced with excitement. "Minister, ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo." Fudge said, settling comfortably into his seat. Harry idly noticed that the house elf was still alone, but he looked up with excitement as Bagman cast sonorus and stepped forward to the rail.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The stadium roared with screaming and clapping of excited spectators. The board across from their box cleared of the ads it had been displaying and displayed the, currently empty, score.

"And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce the Bulgarian team Mascots!"

The right hand side of the stands, a solid block of scarlet, roared with approval as Arthur leaned forward to see. Suddenly he sat back with satisfaction and hurriedly polished his glasses, announcing, "Ah, veela."

Harry flinched and, using one of the spells he was familiar with from his parents, he tapped both ears and prepared himself, before poking Ron. "Plug your ears if you want to remain coherent."

Ron looked at him in confusion, but Harry was watching the female figures striding out with interest. He'd never seen veela before, but the number of times his books had discussed them had left him both nervous and curious. Their skin shone moon-bright, their hair fanned behind them without a breeze, and he felt a giddy feeling swell inside him that took effort to fight. As soon as a hint of music began, Harry spoke the activator of the spell he'd prepared and he went deaf. He caught a look from Arthur from the corner of his eyes, and Arthur shot him a smile, his own hands in his ears.

It was interesting watching them dance without hearing a sound from the crowd, and the giddy feeling tried to sweep over him again. Harry shook out of it, and then reached up and tugged Ron's shirt. The idiot was walking to the edge of the box, and Fudge was busy preening himself. The other Weasley boys were plugging their own ears, and watching with amusement, and so Harry gave up trying to distract him and watched him make a right fool of himself. Finally, the look of the crowd changed, and Hermione poked Harry, moving her mouth. Ron looked sheepish, and so Harry cancelled the deafening spell in time to hear Hermione finish a sentence.

"-still confusing for me, that you were fine and Ron started acting a fool."

"Hermione," Harry added. "I deafened myself. Surely you've found something about veela."

Hermione pouted as Ron sat down red-faced. Harry smiled gently at her. "You can borrow one of my books. I didn't want to test how I'd react to them."

Hermione nodded curtly. "It's going to be the Irish next."

"I look forward to it." Harry returned his attention to the very annoyed crowd. Bagman spoke over them.

"And now, kindly put your wands in the air ... for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

The comet that was apparently their mascot zoomed out into the stadium and did a lap, before breaking into two smaller ones. Harry watched the arrangements with awe, enjoying a display without threat. The comets became a rainbow, and then a giant shamrock that soared over the stands dropping golden rain. Ron clasped at it with joy, tossing the money to Harry.

"Hah! Now you have to get me a Christmas present."

Harry blinked. Apparently Ron didn't know anything about leprechauns, but Harry let it pass and accepted the handful without protest. If it would make him feel better, Harry could certainly accept it. He nodded and caught several more coins, scooping them out of his lap and then throwing one lightly at Ron. Hermione watched with amusement.

The leprechauns dissolved the shamrock and settled opposite the veela to watch the match. Bagman inhaled deeply to prepare, and Harry straightened, raising his omnioculars. This was what he was waiting for. This was Quidditch.

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Harry was ecstatic at the fantastic end of the game. He'd never had more of a rush in his life. He and Ron had a grand argument about the merits and faults of the match, taking them all the way down the stairs and back to the Weasley's tent. Nanna immediately tackled Harry, and even Neville joined in the dynamics talks. As things went along, Connor was soon asleep on Alice, followed by Melanie on Frank and then Nanna on Harry's lap. The adults continued their talking, but when Harry and Neville began to yawn and Ginny to sway in her seat, general consensus sent them all on their way. James and the others had a long walk back to their tent, Connor comfortably laid over Frank's shoulder, and Melanie and Nanna in Remus and Sirius' arms respectively. Harry and Neville trailed them idly, and then fell into their beds once back at camp.

They were hardly asleep before Harry heard someone yelling at them to get up and get moving. Faint screaming came from somewhere apparently far away, and there was sound from outside of many people running. The singing and celebrating of before was wholly gone. Quickly, Harry stood and yanked on his jeans, yelling Neville up and then shaking Connor. Connor woke, and stared around in fright.

"Get up quickly, Connor. Here's your coat, we need to get outside."

Connor scrambled out, and, ignoring his coat, clung to Harry's side. Harry jerked his head towards the girls' tent and Neville ran out,

followed by Harry. Sirius and Remus saw them come out, nodded, and ran towards the commotion. Alice and Lily preceded James, and both women quickly went over to Harry and Neville. Connor moved from clinging to Harry to his mother. Neville came over with Nanna and Melanie, and Lily took their hands and led them into the woods farther away, tilting towards where the Weasley's had been before. Harry immediately ran beside them.

"What's going on?"

"It's a riot." Lily began. A burst of gunshot made Harry and Lily flinch violently, and Harry to stare, frightened, in the direction of the riot. "Good lord, but I think it was started with muggle-baiting. It started in one place, and moved outwards."

Harry nodded slowly, and they continue as they were going. Alice huffed unhappily, and then met Lily's eyes. Lily nodded slowly, and pulled Nanna and Melanie closer. Alice addressed Harry and Neville.

"Boys, please. We need you to go check on Ron and Hermione and the others. We can't move fast enough, and we want these three to be alright. I'm trusting you with this. Please."

Harry nodded quickly, feeling excitement thrill through him mixed with dread. Neville looked from his mother to Lily and then Harry and sighed, nodding slowly. Harry looked over at him and both of them took off running, Harry in the lead. He spared a wish for his broom, but brushed it aside quickly, keeping his eyes peeled for trees or other people fleeing the riot that sounded ever closer as he ran towards where Ron and Hermione should be. Feeling a spark of inspiration, he pulled up and checked on Neville, who was keeping up just fine; Harry remembered with annoyance the number of times Neville had nearly run him over playing chase with his father, something he thought they still did when Frank was home. Harry quickly pulled out his wand and held it in his hand.

"Point Me, Ron."

The wand shuddered and spun quickly, settled in a direction ahead and to their right. Neville pulled his and quickly spoke, "Point Me,

Hermione." Hers was the same, and Neville closed his fist, wielding his wand in preparation for anything, and following as Harry started for where Ron was. They went deeper into the woods, and ran into the others shortly. Ron and Hermione both looked ill. They jumped as Harry and Neville came upon them.

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

Harry jogged over and touched his shoulder. "Looking for you. We heard the riot, got called out of bed. Neville's mother sent us to check up on you and Hermione. Where's everyone else?"

Ron huffed. "We got split. Fred and George should be with Ginny somewhere, but we're stuck out here." Ron's face turned ugly. "We passed Malfoy. Horrid git; threatened Hermione."

Neville muttered something about blood purists and puddles that reminded Harry of Alan in second year. Harry shook it off. "Whatever. Draco's worthless." Harry fell onto Alan's habit of disdaining Draco's heritage. "We need to keep moving out; the riot's coming closer."

Harry began to lead, Neville standing near Ron, and Hermione trying to catch up with Harry to talk. Harry maintained a steady walk that Hermione joined. "Harry, why were they attacking the muggles? They've never done anything."

"Hermione, for a bookworm, you apparently haven't found much of worth." Harry supposed under other circumstances he would've been more patient, but he was currently hearing a lot more of that riot than he wanted to. Finally, though, he took another turn and found a path. Once on it, Neville heaved a large sigh, and Harry went back to Hermione's question with a short apologetic look. "Some wizard's hate muggle-borns; do you really think those would like muggles any better? The war before we were born? That was fought between wizards, one side who believed themselves superior to muggles and muggle-borns, and the others who think no such thing. Those currently playing with muggle-baiting? They were almost undoubtedly on the first side I mentioned."

Hermione looked quiet and scared, and slowly they approached a clearing. Ron wandered in and over to a tree opposite the trail they'd used, smiling with relief.

"We'll hear anyone coming for miles out here." Neville nodded and sank to the ground cross-legged.

Just outside their clearing, someone apparated loudly, and queried, "What's going on?"

Harry jumped to attention with Neville, and then recognized the voice that answered him. "Oh, only a mild riot, Mr. Bagman. It's just off that way."

Bagman spluttered and disappeared, and then two people wandered into the clearing. Harry recognized both, and forced a growl.

"What are you doing here?" Honestly, he was really wondering what Alan and Andrew were doing this far out. They were a long ways from the Salem Sorcerer's School tents. Alan responded to Harry's question with a firm roll of his eyes.

"Getting out of the way of the riot, fool. It's only trampling everything in its way."

"And I suppose you care?" Ron added, standing aggressively. Neville remained seated, but he watched everyone warily, a gesture mimicked by Andrew. Harry paused as he caught sight of Andrew's eyes; they appeared to be glowing white. Harry brushed it off, however, as Alan growled. His response died as someone loudly staggered towards the clearing. Everyone there spun and levelled his or her wand that direction; everyone but Hermione, who, Harry noted, looked panicked. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her behind him, as Andrew shifted to do something very similar for Alan without being obvious about it.

"Who's there?" Harry called. Silence answered him; whoever had been staggering had stopped moving. Beside him, Andrew growled deep in his throat; the sound made Harry's joints ache for a moment before he brushed it off.

“Someone’s there.” Andrew whispered. Harry didn’t doubt him.

Finally, someone spoke into the silence, a voice completely unafraid, voicing what must have been a spell.

“Morsmorde.”

Harry felt fear when Alan flinched and immediately looked to the sky. Andrew’s gaze seemed to almost sharpen as green light spilled from the trees and rose above them to hang in the sky. Harry’s heart tightened as he recognized the form of a glittering green skull with a snake in place of a tongue. Whoever had just cast that had been a Death Eater. Instantly, Harry reacted.

“Stupefy, Impedimenta!” He sent both spells into the trees where the person must have been. They were followed by more spells from the others, barring Ron and Hermione. Whether they hit anyone or not, the possible sound was drowned out as the woods around them erupted in screams of terror. Harry checked that Hermione was between him and the tree, and Neville had stood, facing the opposite direction. Hermione was staring at the sky, horrified, and Harry was cursing himself in every way he could think of. Alan and Andrew were both crouched slightly, watching the woods in equal fervour.

Twenty pops announced the arrival of the ministry wizards. Harry had considered trying to talk first; upon seeing every wand trained upon them, Harry opted instead to scream “Duck!” and pull Hermione and Ron down with him. The others didn’t need telling twice.

“Stupefy!” Each wizard roared. The lights flew towards them, and crossed over their heads. Some hit the tree behind them; others went on to nearly hit the wizards on the far side of their circle.

“Stop! Stop, goddamn you, that’s my son!”

Harry had never been happier to hear his father’s voice. He lifted his head, and smiled as the wizard before him lowered his wand, and footsteps behind him made him spin over and raise his own until he

saw the approaching man to be his father. Harry smiled weakly as James came over and pulled him close.

“Merlin, Harry what are you doing over here? I thought you were with your mother!”

“She was worried about Ron and Hermione. Dad, whoever conjured that was in the woods over there!” Harry insisted, pointed where he and the others had shot their spells. “We heard him come up and cast the spell, and we sent some spells after him, but I don’t know if we got him.”

James immediately stiffened, and he let Harry go to run into the forest, calling Sirius and Frank after him and getting Remus and several others as well. While they left, other ministry officials approached the group. Immediately, Alan and Andrew slipped to the side of the others, and Harry faced the ministry head-on, stepping forward to make himself stand out.

“What’s going on, who cast that?” Harry asked immediately. “He was over there, have you got him yet?”

“Enough.” A stiff-backed, older man in a suit snapped. “Which of you did it? Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?”

Harry stiffened immediately. Neville snapped, “Excuse me? What makes you think something so hare-brained as that?”

“Don’t lie to me! You were discovered at the scene of the crime!”

“Mr. Crouch, stop accusing children!” Someone hissed. “They no more know how to cast the Dark Mark than they know how to use Unforgivables!”

Harry half-wished they hadn’t said that, although it was certainly keeping to the truth. Harry did know quite a bit about both; James believed in him being educated against what he’d fought, and what Harry might one-day fight, following Dumbledore’s belief the Dark Lord wasn’t fully gone.

"Mr. Crouch," One of the women present had lowered her wand, and whispered, "They're kids, Mr. Crouch, they can't have done anything ..." Several people nodded, but Mr. Crouch was stubborn, and glared down at them. Hermione finally spoke up,

"Sir, we didn't do it. The person who cast it was over there, in the woods. He spoke an incantation ..."

"Over there, eh?" Mr. Crouch looked slightly mad, then, and glared once more, "Spoke an incantation? You seem remarkably well-informed, young miss, about how the Dark Mark works."

"With all due respect, Mr. Crouch," Neville snapped, "I think that basis would cover most spells we know from tickling charms to Unforgivables, especially considering that we're all of fourteen."

Mr. Crouch glared once more, but a shout went up from in the woods, and he turned. James and the others returned, a brown-haired man holding a small form in his arms. It took Harry a moment to realize it was a house elf, and not just any house elf. Harry took a short look and then recognized the neat little tea towel the elf was wearing. It was the elf from the top box.

Harry noticed several glances towards Mr. Crouch and, upon looking, found him wearing an expression of utmost distaste and shock. "Impossible." Crouch snarled, before stalking past the others and stomping his way into the bush. James watched him go, and then tilted his head. Remus immediately slipped off to the side to follow him; Harry watched him go and heard a whispered word behind him: apparently Andrew had watched him leave as well. The brown-haired man with the elf hardly seemed to notice. Instead, he murmured,

"Bit embarrassing. Barty Crouch's house elf ... going off like that, it's just a little bit of a sting."

Fortunately Hermione's snort went unnoticed.

"Come off it, Amos." Arthur returned, quietly. "You don't seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark is a wizard's sign. It requires a wand."

"Yeah, and she had a wand."

"What?" Arthur started. James was listening intently, but Harry noticed he was covertly watching the faces of Harry and his group. He gave a small wink when he noticed Harry watching him, but didn't look away. Harry returned to listening to Arthur, who was looking at the wand Amos had handed over.

"Had it in her hand. That's clause three of the code of wand use broken for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand."

Harry pressed against Hermione's arm as a warning that her hiss should not become anything more pronounced.

Another pop announced the return of Bagman, who stumbled, looking breathless and disoriented, and then, upon looking up, goggled at the sky. "The Dark Mark!" He gasped. "Who did this? Did you get them? Barty, what's going on?"

Mr. Crouch had returned empty handed. Harry was startled to see Remus already back quite comfortably, but his expression was one Harry had never thought to see on the easy-going man. He looked dark and troubled behind a mask of ice. Nobody else appeared to notice beyond those who knew him: James had on his business face, and Sirius was appearing purposefully nonchalant rather than naturally so.

Bagman especially noticed nothing. Harry cynically thought he must have been a Gryffindor: anything else would have reacted to the expressions of those around him. "Barty, where have you been? Why weren't you at the match; your elf was saving you a seat – Gulping Gargoyles!" Apparently Bagman had just noticed Winky. "What happened?"

"I've been busy, Ludo, and my elf has been stunned." Barty dryly commented.

"Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But what ..." Bagman looked between the sky, Winky, and Mr. Crouch and gaped. "No! Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand to start!"

"And she had one." Said Amos. "I found her holding it, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she has to say for herself."

Crouch said nothing, and Amos – who Harry could only presume was Amos Diggory – took that for assent, casting Ennervate upon Winky. Harry noticed from the corner of his eyes Remus whispering quickly into his father's ear. James was listening with a stony mask.

Winky woke slowly, in a bemused sort of fashion. Upon finding herself surrounded by wizard's she slowly fixed upon Mr. Diggory's shoes and then brought her gaze up to his eyes, and then, beyond that, to the great green skull resting in the air. Harry began to wonder why no one had dismissed the spell, and then he was brought back by Winky's great, terrified sobs.

"Elf!" Mr. Diggory snapped. "Do you know who I am? I am a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

Winky began to rock back and forth, watching Mr. Diggory in a terrified sort of daze.

"As you see here, someone has brought forth the Dark Mark. You were discovered moments later right beneath it. An explanation, please."

"I – I – I is not doing it, sir! I is not knowing how!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" Barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. The wand was illuminated in the green light of the Dark Mark, and Hermione gasped.

"That's mine!"

Harry looked back at her in surprise and a little irritation. She could have picked a better time!

"Excuse me?" Mr. Diggory asked. "Why is it not in your possession, Miss?"

"I lost it, sir. I don't know when. It was sometime between the match and now, and I was horrified. How did it get here?"

Mr. Diggory watched her curiously. "I wonder the same. Perhaps you are merely avoiding blame."

Harry rolled his eyes determinedly. "Oh, yes. I'm sure the Death Eaters would be highly insulted by you presuming a muggleborn would cast their mark." He drawled sarcastically. Half the officials present gasped in horror, while those who knew him or his father either rolled their eyes or laughed. Mr. Diggory's eyes popped for several long moments before he jerked his jaw shut and swallowed.

"Er, alright." He turned back to addressing Winky and his face became hard once more. "You found this wand, elf? Picked it up and thought you'd have a little fun with it?"

"I is not doing magic with it, sir!" Winky sobbed. "I is – I is – I is just picking it up. I is not making the Dark Mark, sir, I is not knowing how!"

"It wasn't her!" Hermione put in. "Winky has a tiny little voice."

Neville nodded in turn. "Unless she knows some kind of voice changing spell, it can't have been Winky. The person casting had a male voice, deep and full. And somehow, I doubt any of Mr. Crouch's elves would know such spells, either the Dark Mark or the voice-changer."

Frank smiled brightly at his son, and Mr. Diggory looked put out once more. He stood and cleared his throat. "Well, we'll know soon enough. There is a simple spell for this." He placed his wand tip against Hermione's and spoke, "Prior Incantato."

A gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the wands met, a mere shadow of the light above.

“Deletrius.” Mr. Diggory finished. The smoky shadow blew apart swiftly. Mr. Diggory looked down at Winky in a savage sort of triumph. The expression made Harry feel sick. Why was he so insistent on it being Winky? “You’ve been caught red-handed elf! The guilty wand in your hand!”

“Amos, really.” James drawled. “How many wizards know how to do that spell? How many aren’t Death Eaters?”

“Perhaps Amos is suggesting that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?” Mr. Crouch sneered.

A deep silence reigned; save for a small snigger from someone Harry strongly suspected was Alan.

“No, not in the least, sir …” Mr. Diggory murmured.

“You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing least likely to conjure that Mark!” Crouch snapped. “A muggleborn, and myself! Next I suppose you’ll accuse young Mr. Potter?”

Mr. Diggory opened and closed his mouth a few times before Mr. Crouch continued,

“And I suppose you don’t remember the many proofs I’ve given of my opinion of those Arts and those that practice them?” Mr. Crouch’s eyes were bulging unpleasantly.

Mr. Diggory was white beneath his beard. “Of course, sir, I never meant to imply …”

“If you accuse my elf, you accuse me! Where else could she have learned it?”

“Your son.” James snapped.

Mr. Crouch turned to Harry's father with a deadly look in his eyes.
"My son is dead."

Dead silence reigned, and Harry remembered unpleasantly the trial his father had several times complained about, where Mr. Crouch sentenced his own son to Azkaban for being a fanatically loyal Death Eater. Many attributed that trial to the end of Mr. Crouch's forward motion, which culminated in his son's death in Azkaban and his wife's shortly thereafter.

Mr. Weasley coughed lightly. "If Winky did not do the spell-casting, then she must have found the wand after the caster tossed it aside. Winky, did you see the man who had used this wand before you found it?"

Winky trembled violently, looking from Mr. Weasley, to Mr. Bagman, and then to Mr. Crouch. "I is seeing no one, sir. No one."

Mr. Crouch straightened. "Amos." He spoke remarkably calmly for his earlier fervour, even though he still bit out the words. "I know that in the ordinary course of events you would take her into your department to question her. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory clearly didn't think much of this suggestion, but Mr. Crouch was a very powerful man he couldn't afford to offend. Harry's father, however, stepped in.

"Mr. Crouch, the rules are supposed to be followed. Winky may have seen something she doesn't think important, and should indeed be questioned properly."

Mr. Crouch turned to look directly at James. His stance suggested it was not pleasant, but Harry's father didn't flinch. "Is there anyone else in the clearing who would be worth suspicion?" Mr. Crouch bit out. He turned and glanced around before looking past Harry. Harry glanced back and felt his stomach sink. Mr. Crouch was looking directly at Alan and Andrew. "You two. Your names, please?" His voice was tight, and neither one of the boys looked willing to speak up. Harry looked straight at Alan, who sighed.

"Alan Prince." He bit out. "And Andrew Mayfair."

"Americans." Mr. Crouch snapped. "But, Mr. Prince, would your father happen to be British?"

Harry knew exactly what he was getting at. Alan had finally started to grow, and with his lank dark hair and prominent features – Snape's nose was quite hereditary – he was starting to strongly resemble his father, particularly now that he was gangly. Alan, however, gave Crouch a look that strongly suggested he was below him. Harry stifled a smile.

"I don't see how that is relevant. You're asking about the Dark Mark, not bloodlines. I think they are highly unrelated." He pointed out as though Mr. Crouch had not noticed it. It wasn't the smartest thing Harry could imagine doing, but it was certainly amusing.

Mr. Crouch glared. "I suspect, then, that we should perhaps follow protocol and see about proper questioning for you and your friend."

Alan growled as the ministry officials who happened to agree stepped forward. One grasped Alan's arm, the other holding onto Andrew. Andrew was looking determinedly at the ground, and Mr. Diggory apparently noticed this.

"Mr. Mayfair, is there a reason you seem more interested in the grass than what is going on?"

"Not really, no." Andrew lightly observed, still looking down. His words were slightly slurred. Mr. Diggory grabbed his chin to force him to look up, and Andrew pulled out of his grip, his lips pressed tightly shut. It didn't help; his eyes were glowing slightly, and his pull was too strong; he tore out of their grasp with ease. Mr. Diggory gasped and backed up quickly.

"Vampire!" He screamed, and Harry swore. The man holding Andrew dug in as he tried to pull aside, and Alan was pulled away before he could do anything. Ron grabbed Hermione to drag her off to the far side, Neville following reluctantly. Harry was pushed down, but didn't

run; he watched as his father and the others move forward towards where Andrew was panicking. Finally, Andrew screamed. It wasn't human; there was no way it was. The sound reverberated in Harry's skull, and without a single sound, another figure entered the clearing, tossing a spell his father's direction and throwing him and his friends off their feet. Andrew was shortly pulled from the man holding him, who apparently wasn't willing to fight with what was clearly an old vampire. Andrew collapsed against his saviour, trembling. The vampire grimaced, and touched his hand into his pocket, activating something.

Within the minute, a dozen more people apparated in more normally, with sound announcing them. In that time, the ministry had picked itself up, several people looking on with horrible expressions. Harry hadn't stood, so as not to draw attention to himself. He was surprised to recognize some of those who appeared: Geoffrey Alfaerus, the woman from Salem Witch's Institute, the dirty blonde he suspected was Velorian, the Quintelyuvs and Geoffrey's brother. The others he was sure he'd seen around the American camps. Velorian walked over to the vampire and Andrew without a second thought.

"Andrew, are you all right? What happened?"

"I would presume the damn British bigots noticed he was a vampire." The older vampire drawled. Andrew nodded slowly. "Clearly, they freaked out and tried to hurt him." The man threw a glare at James, and Harry noticed his eyes were gleaming as well, and his speech was slurred slightly. The look made it clear: his fangs gleamed in the light of the Dark Mark and his eyes glowed white, much as Andrew's had.

Velorian said something that would get Harry's mouth washed out if he tried it. "I would like to ask you idiots why you tried that?" Velorian called out. Geoffrey interrupted him.

"Where's Alan? He was supposed to be with Andrew."

Andrew pointed off to the side and Geoffrey glared their way. A short scuffle occurred, and Alan ran out of it quickly. Mr. Crouch picked himself up and stalked over, giving the American's a distasteful look.

"I'm. Mr. Crouch."

"Unfortunately, I knew that already." Geoffrey snapped bitterly. "I'm Geoffrey Alfaerus and that was my nephew you were assaulting and his foster brother. Please tell me why."

"They are under this Mark. They are suspects in who might have cast it."

Harry had a grand view of Geoffrey and Velorian's expressions. It was quite the good seat as they both rolled their eyes in sync. Geoffrey continued. "Alright. Were you anywhere near the riot earlier?" Geoffrey emphasized this by shifting the long item in his hands. It took Harry a moment to make a tentative guess that it was a gun. "Yeah, well, we were dealing with that. I can't keep an eye on minors when I'm waving a fully automatic weapon around trying to get fucked up muggle-baiters to listen to reason. Clearly, since I was telling them off for being idiots, the boys I raised wouldn't be playing around with Voldemort propaganda. Oh, Merlin, Mary, and Mordred, will you grow up? It's a goddamn name." Geoffrey snarled as several people nearby flinched. "Fucking British pussies. First you accuse a bunch of fourteen-year-olds of Dark Magic, and then you attack one of them and flinch at a fucking name. The gall you fucktards have to be so hypocritical sickens me. Look, I don't teach my kids that shit. Lie off already and get your head out of your collective ass. Any more objections?"

One of the more plucky people present spoke up, "But he's a vampire!"

"And you're a fucking British bigot, but I'm not allowed to kill you, am I?" Velorian snarled. "That vampire's also my son. Go take you wand, your wife and your prejudice, find a hole that's large enough for your ego, and shove yourself down it. Koreol, get me out of this place. I'm suffocating in the centuries old box they all live in."

The older vampire smiled thinly, and nodded to Geoffrey before performing what Harry presumed to be completely silent apparition and left, Velorian apparating after with the customary pop. Geoffrey

stared after them and gently waved a hand. Several others apparated away, leaving only the Quintelyuvs, his wife, Geoffrey himself, and his brother. All of them were wielding guns. Geoffrey fixed Mr. Crouch with a firm stare.

"I do not have the patience for this. You have my word neither would use that damn spell; I doubt they even know it. You do not need to try to pin it on them. Is there anything else you back-ass-wards people need help with?"

"There is nothing I can think of a scruffy American like you aiding, no." Crouch bit out, sounding like the words were drawn from him through torture.

"However, I would appreciate your help." James spoke up. Harry thought it a little presumptuous of him, but felt that Geoffrey could certainly use his words well enough to put him in his place if he so chose. Honestly, Harry was half-eager to see it happen. It didn't, though. Something better did.

A/N: Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing! I hope you enjoy this chapter as well. Feel free to comment and critique as you see fit, and the next chapter is once again in two weeks, which would be the 15th of November. Thank you all!

Yes, I acknowledge there is rather thick language in the last, but that's how they speak. If you are offended, my apologies, but I will not change it. As with canon, things will be getting darker from here on out in language and action. It certainly won't stop being funny, but it will dip down at times. Keep it in mind, and while I hope you will not leave for offence, I can't and won't stop you. Chances are good that by the time it's the end of fourth year, I will up the rating. Just giving a warning.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifteen

Geoffrey cocked his eyebrow at James and gave him a small smile. “And what might you be requesting help with, Mr. Potter?” The tone was a dangerous one, but Harry wasn’t surprised his dad persisted. He was a Gryffindor.

“I have my suspicions that Mr. Crouch was hiding something he found in the woods. Would you be willing to help us look?”

“Auror Potter.” Crouch snarled. “You didn’t notice anything the first time around, and I didn’t see anything when I looked. Surely you don’t suppose you will find something this time either?”

Harry really wished he could see his father’s expression; the angry stance he bore promised that it would be oh so nice.

“Mr. Crouch, you are not an auror. We are trained to check, and double-check. I felt asking our American equivalent for aid would not be out of order. Please don’t get in my way, or I will have even more suspicions about your intent.”

“I would be more than happy to assist, Auror Potter.” Geoffrey drawled. There was a smile in his voice. “Green, Amaranth; check left with the scruffy blonde if he’s one to go.” He indicated Remus negligently. “Ginger, Freyr, find someone to follow if Mr. Potter doesn’t order you out. I’ll stick with the man of the hour, hm?”

James turned back and returned with equal humour. “Well, your lovely lady and brother can follow Frank, and Sirius will join me. Geoffrey, if you’ll follow us, we’ll go straight back.”

Harry watched them leave and moved to stand by Ron and Hermione. Neville was watching his parents and them with curiosity before he finally asked, “What on earth were they holding?”

“I think they were muggle weapons, called guns,” Harry offered, “but they don’t look anything like what I’m familiar with. I’ve tried taking a gander at a few.” Harry looked after the retreating forms with curiosity, and then put one eye carefully on Mr. Crouch. He was impotently

clenching and unclenching his fists, clearly furious. Harry fought a smug smirk; apparently his dad really had something on him. Harry was always proud of his father's work as an auror; being a Gryffindor was an advantage for him there.

It wasn't long before a call went up from the woods, and they converged again. Shortly thereafter, someone apparated away and Remus and the Americans came back out to give Crouch a bright smile.

"Your presence has been requested by Aurors Potter and Longbottom at Auror headquarters." Geoffrey cheerily announced. "They have several questions for you. Children, you're all going to be following Remus back to your mothers, or Arthur, whoever you came with. Crouch, it was simply smashing being over here. Hope to see you around, if you can talk your way out of this one. Now, if you'll just get out of their way ..."

Ron was the first to speak up. Harry was glad for his brashness; he wasn't willing to stick his neck out but he was dead curious.

"What did you find?"

"Ronald!" Arthur yelped.

Geoffrey laughed and waved him down. "Find? Why, we found nothing of importance. That's classified. But it might just cause a bit of trouble, because we really shouldn't have found it."

Ron was clearly confused, and Hermione was thinking. Harry felt a certain suspicion about what it might mean, so he filed it away for possible future dissection and smiled at Geoffrey. Deciding his curiosity was unlikely to kill him at the moment, Harry spoke up.

"Sir, what is that?" Harry pointed to the weapon hanging off his shoulder, feeling mildly nervous.

Geoffrey glanced where Harry pointed, and smirked. "A Heckler & Koch MP5K sub-machine gun."

Harry looked back at him and blinked. A glance to each side proved everyone else was about as confused as he was. Hermione looked very unnerved, but Ron and Neville were completely clueless. Geoffrey apparently noticed their confusion, and, still grinning infuriatingly, he elaborated.

"It's a firearm. A muggle device for the ... removal of obstacles."

Harry couldn't help it. He snorted. Beside him, Hermione murmured "Removal of obstacles. Right."

Geoffrey shooed Mr. Crouch off to the side and then apparated out. Remus quietly pulled Harry and Neville to his own side and the both of them followed without question. None of their inquiries got Remus to elaborate, and they finally subsided as they were reunited with their mothers and siblings. Apparently the tight look Remus shot them was more than enough for them to understand, and Alice got them to the portkey areas. Some short, curt words later, they had a portkey to Godric's Hollow, a small summer cottage of the Potter's, and the evening, or, more likely, morning came to an end.

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The next week before school was complete bedlam, not the least of which was because of exactly what or more so who his father had had over Mr. Crouch. The headlines the day after were priceless:

Meddlesome Americans Kill Muggle-Baiters at Quidditch Cup – Who is more worrisome, the Americans, or the possible Death Eaters?

The picture they had was one of Geoffrey Alfaerus, with his gun braced on his shoulder, flipping off the cameraman and making several different faces. Harry could only imagine the mess they had. Further along in the article, the names of the apprehended muggle-baiters were listed: several were prominent purebloods. Harry felt it a crying shame that Lucius Malfoy wasn't on there, but he supposed he'd just have to be happy about what they had. The headline after that was one was almost ten times better: His father had apprehended Barty Crouch Jr., a Death Eater who had been reported

as dead in Azkaban. Harry only wished he wasn't living through the mess caused by that. His dad hadn't been home all week.

Sirius had dropped by exactly once to talk to his mother about how things were going, and from the short letter he'd gotten from Neville, Frank and Alice had dropped him and his siblings off at their grandmother's. Currently, Harry was sitting in the living room, his mother napping in her room, and Nanna pouting in her own room as well. He stood up quickly when the fire burned green, startled. They weren't expecting anyone, although Harry had a strong suspicion about who it might be. His suspicion was borne out when Neville stumbled out, looking both ways around the living room and bearing a large bag stuffed with clothes and the like. He looked around nervously again, but Harry rolled his eyes and laughed.

"My mum's sleeping at the moment. Really."

Neville heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Harry. If my grandmother dotes on me one more time, I'm going to try to apparate before I should. I can't stand that." Madame Longbottom had been ecstatic to have a grandson, but she spent every waking moment in his presence telling him he either was like his father or needed to be. It got old very quickly; even Frank hated it.

"Well, you have that standing invitation." Harry drawled lightly. Neville hefted his bag with a raised eyebrow and Harry laughed lightly. "Well, yes, I see that. So, what are we going to do in the meantime? Mother doesn't like me flying without her knowing we're out there and after you managed to break your collarbone running into that tree ..."

Neville took a swipe at Harry's head and growled. "Rub my face in it, why don't'cha. Honestly, we could throw gnomes, play chess, exploding snap, do our homework ..."

Harry snickered. "Homework sounds good. I need a spot of advice about this Potion's assignment. I can't seem to keep it straight for some reason ..."

Homework occupied the next few hours, both of them seated in the living room. However, Neville nearly jumped out of his skin when the

floo flared up once more and he dove behind the couch. It was definitely a good decision, because shortly thereafter, Alice's head showed up.

"Harry? Can you get your mother for me? I'm going to have to pull her out of there for a short time; we've got to make a few definitive decisions here and we need her input."

"Certainly ma'am." Harry answered. "Would you be willing to wait?"

"Harry, go."

The curt tone sent Harry running, and he slipped into his mother's room, knocking loudly on the door. Yelling the request, he turned and scooted downstairs in time to hear Alice start talking in a far too polite tone,

"Neville Tiernan Longbottom, step out from behind the couch and talk to me."

Harry came into the living room to see Neville step out and fold into sitting in front of the fireplace. His mother merely raised her eyebrow and he coughed lightly. Apparently it had only taken her a few minutes to figure out he was there. Harry suspected the schoolwork had been a dead giveaway.

"I couldn't stand having Grandma all over me, mum. I needed out, and I came here. You know it's good and safe here."

"I would've preferred it if you'd left a message. Augusta was very worried."

Neville's chin rose. "I told Melanie where I was going. I didn't want to leave a note and have it found too soon or lost."

Alice shook her head slowly. "Neville, just don't do that again. It was obvious where you were, but your grandmother didn't know that and Melanie wasn't forthcoming about it." She looked up at him for a long moment and then sighed. "Go take Harry and get your trunk over to

his place if Lily will allow it. Merlin knows you won't stay there any longer. Now shoo, I need Lily to come through."

Harry moved aside as his mother stepped quickly past. She looked down at Alice, who smiled thinly.

"We need you to come through. Also, can Neville stay at your place for the rest of the summer? I don't think I can keep him with his grandmother."

"Certainly," Lily chirped. "Now pull out and I'll come through. You all owe me an explanation."

Alice nodded and addressed Neville again, "Your siblings stay there. Melanie can have Nanna over to visit, but I want her to stay there." She pulled her head out, and Lily nodded to both of them before flooing away without another word. Harry sighed, and gave Neville a short smile.

"Well, congrats on getting out of that in one piece. Shall we go get your trunk?"

"You should tell Nanna where we're going." Neville pointed out, closing his books slowly and stacking the papers aside. Harry rolled his eyes and hollered up the stairs.

"Nanna, mum's at the ministry and me and Neville are fetching his trunk. We'll be back quick, so no funny stuff."

Instead, they heard small feet run helter-skelter down the stairs. Harry was glowering when she met them at the bottom, but it didn't seem to affect her in the least. "I'm coming with! I want to see Melanie!"

Harry rolled his eyes, but Neville shook his head slowly. A glance between them showed no quarter, so Harry threw his hands into the air. "Fine, I give. You first, pup."

Getting back was easy, although Nanna remained to hang out with Melanie. Neville's trunk moved into Harry's room, where Harry pulled down the extra bed. There were only a few more days of the holidays for them, and the evening before they had to get back to Hogwarts, the parents were all freed from the ministry to spend time with their children. Alice and Sirius sent their regrets, but Frank and James came to the Potter manor, and Augusta Longbottom sent Melanie and Connor over for the evening meal. Conversation remained upon the ministry, something Harry and Neville listened to with interest.

"Reorganization certainly has been a mess. Crouch got booted out immediately upon the discovery of his son. His loss sent practically everything into limbo; it's a good thing he had a good second in command; Kenner should work everything out cleanly."

"Kenner?" Harry asked.

"Kenner Templar." James elaborated. "A pleasant man, quiet but fair, honest, and diligent. Hufflepuff, really. I think he'll do really well. He's got Percy running circles for him already on making sure everything is in order for ..." James looked over at Harry and Neville and both of them perked. There had been subtle hints of something big going on, but both had learned that bothering their parents about ministry business got them nowhere a long time ago. Finally, James leaned on his elbow and looked them over carefully.

"Well, I suppose this won't be anything too soon. It'll give you something to throw at Malfoy on the train, that's for sure. Harry, Neville ... and Melanie and Nanna of course," James glanced down at them and smiled faintly, "Currently we're finally sure that we are definitely going to be hosting the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts this year."

"No bloody way!" Neville jumped. Harry stared in surprise, and then pointed carefully.

"You didn't anticipate this, did you?" Harry asked carefully. James shook his head slowly with a small smile.

"It's been floating about. But you're not to shove this in anyone's face. You're not supposed to know quite yet." Harry and Neville both pantomimed zipping their lips, and James laughed. "Good kids. That's the good hype at the ministry at least. Can't believe Malfoy got away before we could catch him, but apparently Geoffrey's testimony to seeing him with a mask didn't hold quite enough water that his money couldn't pierce. At least he had that suspicion thrown at him. Better than nothing."

Harry and Neville both frowned and sighed deeply; Neville poking irritably at his food.

"And they're jumping on us about old stuff like Bertha Jorkins' disappearance, and someone leaked about Mr. Crouch's house elf ... the whole mess is going to take a long time to clean up, even discounting the trials we'll have to hold about the apprehended Death Eaters. The amount of hubbub we had about having to contact Salem and theirs for their part in that. Honestly, you'd think they bite or something for how they're all avoiding them ..."

Harry and Neville caught each other's eye and quietly asked to leave the table, Harry fighting down a smile at the ministry's reluctance. They went, heading up to Harry's room in order to look through their stuff and make sure it was packed. Alice had had her day off the day before and she, Lily and Molly had gone shopping for their things. Harry had needed new robes once more, as had Neville and all their books had been acquired, along with the girl's. Since neither had been interested in going, they'd stayed home. They wouldn't have been much help picking dress robes anyways. Looking through their bundles, Neville pulled out his well-tailored set of dress robes in a deep burgundy. The lines were fine and detailed and set in gold thread. On his shoulder rested a stylized cat wrapped in a circle, its tail held in its mouth. Neville fingered it with a small smile, but apparently remembered Harry's presence. He quickly, but with infinite care settled the robes in the bottom of his trunk.

"What do your robes look like Harry?" Neville asked. Harry stepped over to his shelf and pulled down the ones he'd gotten for Christmas second year. They'd fit him now; he'd grown right into them and stopped; he was certain he'd be stuck very short. It just didn't seem

likely he'd grow much more, maybe a few inches if he was very lucky. However, it meant the robes would still fit him and he really liked them. Apparently short wasn't all bad.

The robes were black with dark brown patterning across the back, dark brown trim and faint green embroidery around the neck and wrists. The cut and cloth were both very expensive, and Neville whistled appreciatively. The robes were nicer than his.

Harry flushed much as Neville had and quickly folded them back up and packed them. He hesitated at his shelf, and decided quickly to include the small necklace box that he hadn't taken with him last year. Inside was the pendant he'd gotten with the robes, a gift from his father that meant more than Harry would ever admit. Once that was tucked inside, the rest of the packing continued quietly between them.

III

Harry had never been more grateful for his mother's Charms skills until he had to go to Kings Cross without the help of the Marauders proper or Alice. With Lily along, she decided to shrink their trunks and then floo them all to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, she caught a muggle cab for them and they made quick work of the trip to King's Cross. The rain was falling in buckets, and they were soaked even making just the mad run across to the station. Along the way they ran into Hermione and the Weasleys, all of them just as wet with an irate Crookshanks, Hermione's familiar bought the year before. Harry laughed lightly and he and Neville quickly helped them keep everything together and get onto Platform nine and three-quarters.

Once on there, it was a quick bustle to move all their stuff into a compartment. Fred and George went off on their own, while Harry, Ron and Neville made a point of putting Melanie, Ginny and Nanna in a compartment near their own before setting up their own stuff with Hermione's. Once finished, they stepped onto the platform to say goodbye. Charlie and Bill both were smiling happily and Harry and Neville had a slight inkling about what they might be on about as Charlie hugged Ginny goodbye and added a comment,

"I might be seeing you all sooner than you think."

Neville's mouth dropped open slightly, and he looked incredulously at Harry. Harry returned the look until Neville whispered, "Dragons!" Harry looked back at Charlie who was now grinning wickedly.

"Well, looks like somebody's parents decided not to keep silent on the matter." His eyes were dancing, and Harry and Neville quickly glanced at Lily and zipped their mouths again. Lily laughed and pretended to undo them.

"Feel free to bring it up once you're on the train, boys. Goodness knows Malfoy's son will be flaunting it every which way, since his father won't have kept silent."

Molly wiped at her face and Bill grinned. The whistle sounded and they were shooed back on, but after a moment waving goodbye, Fred and George dragged Neville and Harry into their own compartment. Once there, they were rocked back into their seats, and Neville gave Harry a wry grin. Harry stuck his tongue out at him in turn, and then turned to the twins.

"Yes, good sirs? What questions have ye this time around?" He tried for an innocent look but he strongly suspected it wasn't working as well as he would like it to. The twins kept grinning at him, and Ron was watching eagerly from the side. Finally, Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Neville, when did this last happen?"

"Probably last year when they lost track of the Marauder's map." Neville drawled, looking at his fingernails. Harry turned to give him a firmer glare and Neville managed a near perfect innocent look except that Harry knew perfectly well he was completely faking it.

"Neville ..." Harry trailed off. Neville brought up his hands and gave another innocent look.

"Alright, fine, last time we had this hubbub was ... you know, I've never run across it. Suffice to say it's been at least a hundred or so years. Are you going to tell them, or just dither about for the next few hours?" He raised his eyebrow and Harry stuck his tongue out in turn, looking back to the others with a wide grin.

"Hogwarts is hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year."

The three Weasleys present all stared in shock. When they all started asking questions, Harry quickly reassured them of otherwise, and, after several rounds of 'I don't know', sent them on their way. Ron was sitting with a wide grin, and laughing.

"I can't wait to see what will come of that! Imagine getting in and winning? You'd be pampered by everyone! So much fame ... and I think there's a monetary prize too!"

Neville nodded lightly and Harry thought about the kind of recognition that would get. The contests would be so much fun, too. Challenging, difficult, and inspiring. He nodded slowly to Ron's talking, until finally Hermione rolled her eyes and caught Neville's. He pulled out an Exploding Snap deck and snapped it under Harry's nose. The sound was followed by a hollow thunk as Harry rapped his head against the wall and swore. Neville snickered, and Harry finally gave in to let him begin the game.

The trolley came back and left with a few less snacks than before, Harry picking and choosing as Neville laughed faintly and chose with even more precision, which Harry took his own turn to poke fun at. However, about an hour away from Hogsmeade, Harry needed to step out of the compartment. On the way back, he paused when he overheard Alan's voice from the compartment just past his own. Neville had seen him hovering outside the door, but stopped when Harry waved his back to his seat, listening intently.

"Draco, you're being stubborn again." The voice was bitterly cold. "My father already told yours what priorities he has; you're not going to get at him through me. I'm just warning you that if I see you cornering a younger student again, I will put something unpleasant between your sheets and you know exactly what my potions' skills are."

"It was just Potter's little sister. She's not a concern of yours, Snape."

Harry heard Alan's voice drop several tones. "The name is Prince, Malfoy unless you desire to lose the only thing about you that matters to your father."

"Out of my compartment, Prince." Draco's voice shook, and Harry knew it was with rage. "I'll leave your precious mudbloods be if you take the initiative and don't bloody talk to me ever again."

Harry quickly moved into his own compartment, knowing he needed to appear to have not overheard the conversation. It would obvious he'd been listening in to Alan, but Alan could pretend to not have noticed if Harry made an effort to get out of the way. Opening and closing the door silently, Harry was glad that none of the others had overheard that. Alan stalked past, and only then did Harry latch the door. He sat back silently, and tried to find what of that conversation he could turn to his use, and what he could tell to the others.

"I just overheard Prince talking to Malfoy." Harry rolled the words in his mouth. "I never knew those two hated each other that much." That was the truth; he'd never have thought Alan would say something like that. That it was to Draco didn't lessen the vitriol any. "Prince just told him off for bullying a younger student. Malfoy apparently didn't like it."

Neville snorted. "I could hear the tone they were using. If it had dropped any colder, something would've froze."

Harry looked sidelong at Neville, but he appeared to have only overheard what he'd mentioned, and nothing more. Harry nodded along with him, and shook his head. "Indeed. They really weren't being nice to each other. But that doesn't concern us. I'm gonna go check on my sister, alright?" The others nodded, and although Neville watched him leave, he didn't follow.

It only took a short look to see that whatever altercation Nanna had had with Malfoy hadn't affected her any, and considering how Alan had ripped into him, Harry didn't have any heart left to try and take him any further to task.

The ride ended shortly, and Harry looked bleakly out into the rain with a heavy sigh before looking between Neville, Ron, and Hermione and

racing over to wait for the carriages to pull them to the school. As Harry had noticed before, Neville looked over the carriages with a far more considering eye than Harry did, likely once again contemplating just what might pull them before they crowded inside and made their way towards the school and its feast.

The storm was sending lightning across the sky, with thunder booming dully as they made their way up to the grand castle. Harry scurried out and made it into the hall just after Ron, who was shooting into his own growth like a weed and now had very long legs. Unfortunately for Ron, this meant he walked straight into Peeves and his trouble making. Harry darted out of the way of the excess water, and smirked at Ron. He then had to skip back to avoid getting his feet wetted by the next water balloon.

“Peeves!” Professor McGonagall hollered as she strode into the room, slipping on the floor and nearly taking Ron down with her in a mad grab for balance. Ron set her back on her feet, and she turned her full glare on the cackling poltergeist. “Get down here at once and stop this mess!”

“Not doing nothing!” Peeves cackled. “They’re already all wet, the little squirts!”

McGonagall huffed and glowered. “I shall call the headmaster, Peeves! Stop this right now!”

Peeves stuck out his tongue and tossed the balloons into the air. Someone vanished them before they could fall, and the procession moved along into the Great Hall, finding their ways to the tables set on either end of the hall. Harry and the others moved all the way along to the Gryffindor table at the far side, and sat, looking over the room with interest.

Alan was an easy person for Harry to pick out after the yearlong friendship they’d cultivated. He was getting tall, and there was very little question as to his parentage now that he far more strongly resembled his father. It really was the fault of his strong nose. He also sat at the Slytherin table with undeniable grace, talking, as always, with Blaise Zabini and an older, female student. He was also shooting

nervous glances at the staff table, and Harry followed his gaze with curiosity until he settled upon the scarred visage of Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody. Harry's mouth quirked. He remembered his mother's exasperation when she'd heard of the decision Dumbledore had made to have him teach. However, after Remus had had to resign thanks to a combination of Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy's attitude, Harry supposed Moody would be alright, although almost certainly far more strict. There was a betting pool on whether or not Moody would randomly perform dorm searches. Harry certainly hoped he wouldn't.

They were all waiting for the Sorting of the new students, which Nanna would be among this year. They had taken a seat where Harry was beside Neville and across from Ron and Hermione, and on his other side sat Melanie, the seat next to her kept empty in hopes of having Nanna sit there. Across from her was Ginny and then Collin Creevey, the hero-worshipping student who had shadowed Harry and Neville ever since learning they were the children of the 'famous aurors'. Just because their parents were famous didn't make Harry or Neville keen on basking in that fame, unlike Draco Malfoy of Slytherin. However, they had yet to figure out how to deter the small, and very insistent boy.

"Oh, hurry up." Ron moaned. "I'm so hungry I could eat a hippogriff."

"Really, Ron." Neville drawled. "How would Buckbeak feel to hear you say that?"

"He'd commiserate!" Ron returned. Neville turned the tables and shortly applauded his retort with raised eyebrows. When Ron flushed, Ginny snickered and touched Hermione's shoulder.

"Oh Hermione! Did you see how Ron caught on so quickly? And to use 'commiserate'? I'm so proud of your good influence!"

Ron threw a betrayed look at Ginny who merely smiled lightly back. Harry glanced purposefully off to the side, and then jerked his chin towards the doors as the swung open to reveal McGonagall with the very wet first years. Harry winced slightly and looked for his sister, but looking for black hair amongst many other wet children was fruitless.

However, soon they were lined up and the hat sang its song, leading into the sorting and the meal. Harry was delighted to have his sister in Gryffindor with him; he'd never really questioned that she would be. The whole thing concluded with Dumbledore telling them to tuck in, and the plates filled.

Nearly Headless Nick, sitting properly just nearby them looked at Ron's rampant indulgence and sighed. "You're lucky there's a feast to have at all this evening. There was trouble in the kitchens earlier."

"Lemme guess." Harry grinned. "Peeves?"

Nick nodded. "The very one. Wanted to attend the feast. Course, that's out of the question. He's utterly uncivilized; can't see a plate of food without throwing it. The Friar was all for giving him the chance, but the Bloody Baron firmly put his foot down, wouldn't hear of it and rightly so."

Harry fought away a smirk. The Bloody Baron didn't like anyone but Slytherins, and Alan had shortly explained that he probably knew the castle better than anyone, which was why he could so easily keep Peeves in line. The poltergeist wasn't the most observant, and so the Bloody Baron was quite capable of frightening him into compliance with a few well-chosen words. Alan's description really endeared Harry towards the ghost, but he still refused to speak to anyone outside of the house, no matter what Alan's recommendations were.

"Peeves did seem hacked off about something." Ron mumbled through his food. "What'd he do?"

"The usual." Nick waved his hand irritably. "Wreaked mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. The place swimming in soup. Terrified the poor house elves out of their wits, he did."

Hermione gave a slight gasp. Harry and the others turned, and Harry frowned lightly.

"There are house elves in Hogwarts?" She asked slowly. Harry nodded, and she gave him a longer, lingering glance. Harry strongly suspected she'd haul him off somewhere for a very long conversation

soon that he wasn't sure he'd like, but he nodded slowly in place. She returned to eating with a melancholy air, and he went back to his own in a similar mood, for different reasons. Her display of attitude had reminded him of Alan's on the train, something he wasn't sure he was comfortable with. He'd have to talk to him.

The meal ended, and Dumbledore soon stepped forward to make the announcements about the coming year. Harry held his breath as most of the school gasped hearing that the Quidditch cup was cancelled; he broke into a broad grin when the Triwizard Tournament was confirmed in its stead. There was apparently a small hitch to be smoothed over, doubtless the difficulty with Crouch losing his job just before the beginning , but everything else was apparently moving smoothly. Harry glanced across the room as it was explained and the limits set; he happened to have the timing to see Alan suddenly lose a lot of tension from his shoulders all at once. He couldn't think why just then, but the houses were dismissed, and Harry stood with the rest, following carefully as they all went up the stairs, listening to the scheming between Fred and George. He slowed to walk with Ron and Neville.

"Either of you entertaining grand visions of winning the Triwizard cup?" Harry asked playfully. Neville shoved his nose into the air.

"Course not." Neville returned. "I wouldn't stand a chance against the might of the Weasleys."

Ron flushed, and forced a laugh. "I suppose my brothers are intimidating, aren't they?"

Neville gave him a curious glance that suggested he had no clue what he was talking about. "Your brothers? Ronald dear, I was worried about you." He sniffed. "I don't have nothing against your might, boy, and I haven't a reason to try and face it down. My lily white skin might be marred."

Harry couldn't help but to break into laughter as the ridiculous accent Neville faked, and the other two joined him in the amusement. Harry entertained the thought of winning and having his own legacy, but after a moment he shrugged it off instead. There wasn't much point in

it. He couldn't get in, and if he could all the sixth and seventh years were likely better suited for it anyways. He didn't suppose anyone younger than seventeen would get chosen anyways; they simply didn't know enough. But ... the thrill of having something to claim as his was a deeply drawing force and Dumbledore was certainly not infallible. Getting in to add his name ...

Stepping into the common room, Harry sighed and bypassed Neville and Ron's invitation to join them by the fire. Neville would keep Ron out, and Harry gladly slipped into his trunk, pulling out the small box with the snake necklace. Lying back on his bed, the pendant in hand, Harry looked it over admiringly. The work was beautiful, a pewter-and-gold serpent in a complicated coil, large for a pendant and his for two years. He supposed it symbolized a part of himself he'd likely always be known for. The Potter parselmouth. The Gryffindor parselmouth, indeed. His father had sent it to him second year alongside the fine robes, and it was something he treasured because it meant his dad hadn't turned on him after finding out he was something of a Slytherin. It gave him hope that he might be able to accept the house Harry had refused.

Harry slipped the pendant back into its box and then into his trunk, and dressed for bed. This had been a long day, and the warm sheets called him after the cold storm. He could worry about school and Tournaments another day, namely the next one coming up.

A/N: Well, another chapter, and moving into the school year. Please Read and Review? Thank you very much to everyone who did so last chapter (I think there were a few, but so little ... sniffle I feel unappreciated.) Next chapter in two more weeks, Thursday, or, as demonstrated, Wednesday evening if I'm feeling generous!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning was busy, however, and Harry was spending time in Herbology with the others before heading to Care of Magical Creatures, at which most of his friends were, whether he could really speak with all of them or not. Neville had opted out for lack of interest. However, Harry had to hide his amusement and pleasure when Ron had bemoaned their still attending Hagrid's classes with the Slytherins. After a year of work, it was much easier than he'd previously found it. Alan was a good teacher. He was also very good with arguments, which made Harry eager to speak to him sooner rather than later.

Arriving at Hagrid's hut after having a class full of squeezing the pulsing blisters of bubotubers, looking down into the crates full of 'Blast-Ended Skrewts' was not as disturbing as it might have otherwise been, but it didn't make his nervousness any less. Hermione summed up the rather easy question on all their minds,

"What are they, Professor Hagrid?"

"Creatures." He beamed. Harry got a rather horrible feeling that he'd bred them rather illegally. It seemed the sort of thing he'd do. "Jus' hatched, so yeh can raise 'em yourselves."

"Why would we want to raise them?" Drawled a cold voice.

Harry turned slowly to look over the on-coming Slytherins and found himself looking right at Draco Malfoy, flanked as always by his goons. Behind him, Harry found himself looking at Alan who looked about as thrilled as Draco did for the upcoming class. This only made Harry's current mood worse, and he turned back to listen to the assignment intently. Feeding them was definitely an adventure, but Harry set to it with a will. About the time Draco complained about them being capable of burning, stinging, and biting, Harry turned and snapped,

"Well, they'd certainly be able to make someone shut up fast, wouldn't they? Just because you're scared doesn't mean you have to gripe about it and make yourself look bad."

Draco paled rapidly and Harry sneered before turning back to his own crate and tossing some frog liver in with more force than strictly necessary. When class ended, Harry stood and left before any of the others, leaving them behind. He grabbed a bun and layered a sandwich before leaving the hall just as the others entered. Neville pulled away and grabbed his shoulder to stop him, levering him farther from the door.

"What's into you, Harry? You're completely out-of-sorts and I can't think why."

"It's nothing, Neville. It doesn't have to do with you."

"Well then what is it?" Neville snapped. Harry opened his mouth to give him a nothing answer and Neville strengthened his grip, seemingly unaware that he was almost pulling Harry's feet from the ground. "Don't give me a nothing answer, Harry, I won't buy it."

Harry squelched his anger that Neville was already taller than him; the only person with them that wasn't was Hermione and Ginny, and they weren't done growing. He was almost dead sure he was, and thus Neville had a distinctive advantage. He remained silent, since he refused to lie to Neville or take his anger out on someone who was like a brother. Neville watched his face and let him go.

"You're getting secretive, Harry. It's not ... it doesn't seem right but I'm not actually surprised." He glanced aside and huffed. "I'll make your excuses, but please don't keep this up with me." He gave him a wry smile and left before Harry could say anything more. As he walked into the Great Hall, Harry caught sight of Alan slipping in there as well and their eyes met for a short moment. Alan lifted his chin minutely and Harry turned into the corridors of the school, walking slowly and eating as he went. He made his way to his final destination and sat himself in a far corner in the library, propping up his feet and pulling out his Arithmancy text, thumbing through it as he waited. It wasn't ten more minutes until another person came into the back area, and Harry waited before looking up. His eyes met the black ones of Alan and he fought back his irritation to smile crookedly at him.

"Hey Alan."

"Harry." Alan tipped his head. "You're annoyed." He observed curtly, leaning back in his seat and fiddling with his wand. "Why?"

"On the train. You were brutal to Draco. What had he been doing to my sister? She seemed fine." Harry trailed onto his sister, distracting from his main point. Alan glanced aside.

"He'd just cornered her and started in on blood supremacy and how she was less than him and was required to move out of his way. She was standing up to him like he didn't even cast a shadow on her, returning that real gentlemen stepped aside for ladies. I just stepped in and told him off, and then tailed him back to his compartment to settle an earlier dispute of ours. Nothing that concerns you." He spoke with finality Harry ignored.

"You were really harsh, Alan. That was really low."

"His own words were low, Harry, and I'm not sharing. Just trust that he earned it several times. It doesn't concern you." He repeated. Alan hesitated, and then ducked his head. "I was rather mean, but the issue bothered me."

"It had nothing to do with my sister, did it?"

Alan paused. "No, it didn't."

Harry watched him and said nothing, merely turning back to his text and looking over the content in silence. It was only a few more moments before Alan go his own work out and the silence relaxed into comfort. Harry waited a few minutes before asking an idler question.

"What happened after Crouch jumped on you and Andrew?"

"Nothing much." Alan returned, but a smile worked into his voice. "My godfather ripped into Geoffrey, and so did my aunt. Merlin, Mary and Morgan, that woman can be scary." He hitched his voice up several tones to mimic his aunt, "Once again, you show your absolute care in

setting a good example for our children, Jeff.' She started." Alan snickered, "and of course, Geoffrey just turned around with his nonchalance, 'Damn straight I am. They're not going to put up with any of that bloody nonsense about muggle baiting.'"

Harry laughed. "And lemme guess, she just snapped right back?"

Alan grinned, raising his voice again, "And that is also why you're letting your mouth run so filthily in front of them, and why you posed for the paper by flipping them off and brandishing your gun with your tongue stuck out. Oh, now I see your plans."

Harry doubled over laughing. "She didn't!"

"She did." Alan laughed. "Oh, she did. He couldn't think of any response for quite a bit after that. Andrew just about knocked over a side-table when he collapsed on the couch, he was laughing so hard. She really wasn't pleased, despite the fact that she had been there, wielding a gun herself."

"You said she's almost as good as Geoffrey?" Harry checked. Alan nodded slowly. "And Andrew ..." Harry felt a slight pinch and Alan shook his head slowly.

"Andrew is my brother. I grew up with him in the same house. You're my confidant."

The casual way Alan said it comforted Harry and he just nodded carefully and turned back to his book to hide his pleased smile.

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That evening, while they were leaving the Great Hall after the meal, Harry was just stepping out, followed by an attentive Neville and the others. They had wandered into the Entrance Hall when Harry paused as he saw Draco and Alan face each other with dark expressions. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but their expressions spoke more than words. Both were fingering their wands, and the rest of the Slytherins in their year stood by silently arrayed

more towards which person they supported. Harry took a moment to read it, and was surprised by what he saw. Behind Malfoy were more students, strictly pureblood and all proud. Several had remained unaligned, but most were watching Alan with care. Behind him stood only a few students. Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini and another Harry didn't recognize. Their families were more widespread, and although they held little ministry power, they had connections that Harry strongly suspected went into America. He would bet that if it came to a head, Alan had the more valuable people.

However, at the moment, people didn't matter. A twist of Alan's pose, and Draco's face flushed before Alan turned and stalked towards the dungeons, Blaise at his back and to his left. Draco, still wearing a dark expression, turned and threw a spell at Alan's back. A shield flared and crackled, and Alan spun in time to see Draco flinch from a spell shot from the far side. Draco yelped, and then there was a loud bang. In Draco's place was a white ferret, and Moody was stalking down the steps, his wand trained on the Slytherin's.

"There ain't an ounce of honour between any of ye, is there?" Moody growled. Harry moved forward, surrounded by his friends in order to hear the conversation. Alan stood stiffly by the path to the dungeons, not responding to Moody's words. Moody grinned darkly and then turned quickly back to Crabbe and Goyle. "Don't touch it!"

Harry looked down and nearly bit through his lip as he saw that Moody had apparently turned Draco into a pure white ferret. It was harsh, but at Moody's shout, the ferret took off for the dungeon entrance.

"No you don't, laddie." Moody growled, and aimed his wand. Draco lifted ten feet into the air and smacked into the ground with a sharp smack. Harry saw Alan flinch, and felt ill himself. "I don't like people who attack when their opponent's back is turned." Draco smacked into the ground again, and Harry saw Neville's eyes flash. Ron looked excited, and Harry forced himself to look away. "Stupid, cowardly, scummy thing to do." Draco smacked into the ground once more, and then, with another, muffled bang, changed back into Draco Malfoy, looking dazed and seated on the floor. Moody thumped forward to

look into his eyes, each step punctuating his speech. “Never – do – that – again.”

Draco winced and nodded painfully. Moody gave him a dark leer and grinned. “Let’s have a little chat with your Head of House, now, why don’t we?”

Harry heard Draco mutter something that had ‘my father’ audible in it. That seemed to snap Alan out of his pose and he stepped back to allow Moody to clump by. His face remained almost painfully impassive, and he waited a long time after Moody was gone to move into the dungeon. Harry was dragged off by Neville before Alan moved forward, and reluctantly he followed. Ron closed his eyes blissfully as they continued walking, murmuring to himself. Neville snapped at him.

“That’s a sick thing to do to someone, Ron, and you’re sick to have enjoyed it. That could seriously damage someone; human-to-animal transfiguration is devilishly hard, and had he done something wrong or hit him too hard Moody would’ve gotten into a shitload of trouble.”

Ron snapped out of it and glared at Neville. “Malfoy’s father is a Death Eater!”

“So are we all only carbon copies of our parents now?” Neville snapped back. Harry felt his anger and, glaring at Ron, grabbed Neville’s shoulder to drag him upstairs before Ron could continue the fight. He didn’t look back. Once they were in the dorms with the door pulled shut, Harry let go of Neville and dropped onto his bed. Neville silently watched him before turning back to his bag and fishing out his homework. They were silent for several minutes before Harry spoke.

“When do we have Defence?”

There was a faint rustle of paper. “Thursday.” Neville curtly answered. Silence reigned again, but Neville was the one to break it. “He’s only hostile to Slytherin’s and Death Eaters.”

“Draco isn’t yet his father.” Harry returned quietly.

“Does he want to be anyone else?”

Harry couldn’t respond to Neville’s return for a long time. When he did, he didn’t even know if Neville heard it. He certainly didn’t respond.

“Does he have any choice?”

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Come Thursday, however, Neville and Harry had regained some enthusiasm of having a fully competent teacher in Defence against the Dark Arts. No matter Moody’s prejudice, he was an auror, and one well respected by those who had fought beside him. Moody clumped darkly in, and then called roll, his magical eye watching those who responded. When he went over Harry and Neville’s names, he turned and nodded slowly to both of them. Neville smiled slightly at the recognition; Harry could only remember the tight expressions on both Snape and Alan during Potions earlier that week. Neither seemed to like Moody in the least, and Harry suspected he knew why – and he didn’t like it. Moody didn’t seem to take his reticence amiss, and continued through the class. Once everyone had been called on, and the books were away, Moody looked over all of them.

“You’ve got a thorough grounding in Dark Creatures; you’re last teacher left me a summary of it. Good man, Mr. Lupin, and a pity he can’t teach again. However, you’re behind, very behind, on Dark Curses and the like. There are many things wizards can do to each other and not all of them are pleasant. I’m here for the year to bring you up to scratch.”

“The year? Only?” Ron blurted out.

Moody looked at Ron a long moment and then smiled grimly. The effect contorted his face rather grotesquely. “Yeah, only a year. Then it’s back to retirement. But as I was saying, I need to bring you up on what we as people have in our ability to do to each other. Magic isn’t all fun and games.

“So we have curses. According to the ministry, you’re supposed to see counter-curses and leave it at that for this year, but me and

Dumbledore have a higher opinion of your nerves than that. I think many of you can face what a real Dark Curse looks like, and Dumbledore agrees. You need to know. A dark wizard won't tell you what he's using, and he won't be nice and polite about it. If he's got it in his head to curse you, he'll do it from behind, from the dark, without warning and he'll use the worst of his repertoire to bring you down before you can make him face you like a man. You can't fight what you don't know. You have to be ready for it, and you need to put that away, Ms. Brown, when I'm talking to you."

Lavender squeaked, shuffling her papers beneath her desk. She'd been showing Parvati something and moved it quickly aside. Moody watched her for a long moment and then returned to addressing the class, his magical eye staring her direction still.

"Would anyone know the curses most heavily punished by magical law?"

Several people tentatively raised their hands, including Harry and all his friends. Neville did so reluctantly. Moody looked them over and pointed first to Ron. The hands went down just as slowly, and Ron stammered.

"Er, my dad told me about one ... the Imperius curse, or something?"

"Your dad would know." Moody nodded grimly. "That curse gave the ministry one hell of a time during the war, so he would know." Moody got heavily to his feet, stalked to his desk and pulled open the drawer, bringing out a large glass jar containing three black spiders. Ron twitched beside Harry; he hated spiders.

Moody fished one out and held it in his hand, before raising his wand with a look of utmost distaste and aimed it at the spider, murmuring 'Imperio.'

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a thin filament and swung down to the desk. Once there it raised itself onto only four legs, and, with the others pinned tightly above its head, it began to march across the desk firmly in a completely straight line. Several students tittered, and Moody's face cracked into a grim smile. The spider threw

itself into cartwheels and the students began to laugh. Everyone, that is, save Harry and Neville, although Harry felt a smile fight to find its way onto his face, if only to ignore the reality of what that spell meant.

"Think it's funny?" Moody growled. Suddenly, the spider stopped cartwheeling and laid itself flat on the desk, all its legs spread wide around it. "Think about it. What if that were you?" The laughter died instantly. "Total control. The wielder of the spell can make you do whatever they want. You could kill your family; your friends ... talk riddles and speak secrets, kill, maim, torture."

"When the war was on, there were many under the Imperius. It was a hell of a job working out who was under someone's control, and who was acting as they wanted. It is a curse that can be fought, but it takes a rare talent and firm grasp on yourself. We'll cover it sometime, but for all of you, the best course is to avoid being hit with it. Constant Vigilance!" Moody barked; the class jumped, and Neville gasped lightly. He covered his chest and closed his eyes slightly. Harry couldn't think why this would be affecting Neville so.

Moody picked the prone spider off the desk and tossed it back into the jar. "So? What's the next curse?"

Several hands went up once more, hesitantly and with more thought. Harry raised his own and Moody pointed to him with a faint nod. Harry paused as he lowered his hand.

"The Cruciatus." Harry said with finality.

Moody nodded tersely. "The Cruciatus." He reached into the jar and pulled out another spider, placing it on the desk and glaring at it for a moment. He muttered something unintelligible, and then waved his wand. The spider grew in size, until it was larger than a tarantula. Ron jerked his chair backwards and gripped its sides, his eyes staring in fright. Harry was staring for a far different reason, but half his attention was on Neville, who had stiffened.

Moody raised his wand with another disgusted look and muttered, "Crucio."

Harry flinched as the curse hit, and watched with terrified fascination as the spider curled in upon itself and began to rock violently from side to side. Harry could only imagine the terrified screams that would have come had the spider possessed the ability for sound. The rocking became spasmodic and Moody ended the curse, spitting onto the ground before rapidly shrinking the spider and returning it idly to the jar.

Harry glanced at Neville, and forced himself not to react. Neville was pale and deathly still, not reacting, as though he could still see the spider jerking about. Harry couldn't imagine why he was affected like this, but he carefully grabbed Neville's hand. Neville flinched quickly, and then glanced fearfully at Harry. Apparently satisfied that it was Harry there, he relaxed ever so carefully and closed his eyes for a long moment.

Moody began speaking again. "Cruciatus is pain. You need nothing more than your wand to bring a man to his knees. It was very popular as well; more so than the Imperius. Does anyone know others?"

Hermione raised her hand, but Harry didn't, preferring to keep his grip with Neville who seemed to have resigned himself to the subject matter but didn't let go of Harry's hand. A glance around proved that no one else had raised theirs. Moody indicated that Hermione should speak, and she reluctantly did so.

"Avada Kedavra." She whispered. Harry refused to join the rest of the class in looking at her, instead focusing on his desk. With parents who had been aurors, and in the thick of the fighting, he already knew all of these. Apparently Neville knew them better than he'd ever said, because his grip on Harry's hand tightened even more.

Moody also appeared grim about the last. "The killing curse." He nodded slowly. "The last and worst of the three Unforgiveables." He reached slowly into the jar and pulled out the last spider. He held it as he turned his eyes to everyone in the room. "The killing curse takes a lot of power and intent. Not everyone can use it; no one ever should. I hate the spell myself, and I'll never use it on another human being, even when the ministry gave its permission to aurors. It's a despicable spell."

He placed the spider down and it scuttled across the desk. Moody raised his wand, and spoke, not quite shouting, "Avada Kedavra!" A brilliant green light shot across the space with a rushing sound, like a giant bird, and the spider fell without a mark or flutter, unmistakeably dead. Harry swallowed painfully; Ron threw himself out of his seat and several girls gasped quietly.

Moody picked up the dead spider carefully and looked darkly across the class. "It's the worst spell you could use on another person. Disgusting and cowardly. It's undeniably powerful: there's no counter-curse, no blocking it. It's death, pure and simple. No one has ever survived it when cast correctly. But the casting is tricky. It's a strong curse," he repeated with emphasis, "requiring power and intent. You could all aim your wands and say the words right now and not give me so much as a nosebleed. But you won't be using this curse on nobody, and you won't learn it in my class.

"I'm here to teach you to defend yourself, but you have to want this and you have to listen. You have to know. Constant Vigilance." The class jumped again; Neville's grip on Harry's hand tightened before he released it. "You need to see what you're up against, and you need to be prepared. These three curses are all the Unforgiveables. Using them on another human being holds a life sentence in Azkaban. That is what you are fighting out there. Get out your quills ... copy this ..."

The rest of class was note taking. Harry wrote silently, with the rest of the class, and when the bell rang they walked carefully out. Harry watched Neville maintain his tight-lipped silence, and followed closely to him. Outside the classroom, chatter about the curses abounded as everyone began to talk their worry away. Harry hadn't found it amusing at all, and neither had Neville. Hermione watched them both with a firm focus, but Ron seemed oblivious for the moment. Wanting privacy, and needing to talk to Neville alone, Harry grabbed his shoulder and shook his head shortly at Hermione before leading Neville down the stairs, skipping past others with ease. Neville followed blankly. Finding the kitchens was easy, and he quickly asked for a small meal for himself. They brought more than enough for both of them, and Neville gave Harry a strained smile before settling to eat

once more. Having the Marauders raise them had given them a good understanding of what they could pull off at school. Neville slowly relaxed, and he brought up the topic himself as he began to polish off the last of his plate.

"My parents don't talk about the war too much in regards to themselves. They'll talk about the Order, and the lives they saved, and the fighting in general, but what happened to them, personally, never really crosses their tongues."

Harry listened intently, nodding slowly. "My parents are much the same, and Sirius and Remus."

Neville shrugged. "I've got some memories, you know? Vague recollections from being a small child. I shouldn't, really, but because ... I can hear screaming. It's etched into my mind. It came out not too long ago, actually, when I was about ten and my parents were testifying about in the court. I don't even remember why I was there. They didn't get me out before the Dementors passed by; they were furious with Fudge after. But it didn't make me forget that when they went by, my mother screamed both in reality and in my memory." Neville pulled his legs to his chest and looked aside with blank eyes. "I got it out of them last summer. Did you know Death Eaters came to our house shortly into November the last year of the war? They were looking for their Master. They tortured my parents. I must have been hidden, or in another room. I remember hearing them scream, but nothing else. They barely told me that. Your parents came by and saved them before it got too far, but," Neville gave a crooked grin, "you never forget that sort of thing. Apparently I wasn't too young to be able to forget it either. It was just disturbing to see a curse that I know scared my parents."

Harry watched Neville carefully. His colour was returning, and he was rocking slowly, his knees drawn up to his chest, but his eyes were clearer and his face several times more alive. Harry couldn't stop a chuckle as he noticed he was avoiding thinking about what Neville had just said. Harry stood awkwardly and grabbed his arm, pulling him to his feet.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"I need to know." Neville whispered. "I won't be defeated by a memory, Harry."

Harry's mouth quirked. "No, I suppose not. But still." Harry nodded shortly to the house elves and paused by the door. Awkwardly, he pulled Neville against his side and hugged him with one arm. "I'm here."

Neville chuckled. "You wouldn't leave if I pried you off, Potter."

"No," Harry chuckled in return and gave him a roguish grin, "I suppose not. If it were me in your place, you wouldn't be pried off either."

Neville jerked his head up with a smile, completely agreeing before leading the way out.

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Back in the Common room, there wasn't much to do but Harry sat by the fire anyways and listened to Ron whinge about the difficulty of Divination as he worked on making out a long star chart. Harry rolled his eyes with each complaint, but took it as it came. Finally, however, with Harry there for commentary and ideas, he made up the whole lot and went upstairs. Hermione put down her books slowly and shortly requested that Harry stay behind. Harry did so; Neville was either asleep upstairs, or reading with his curtains closed and he should be fine now. Ron would likely go to sleep immediately anyways, so staying up a little longer wouldn't be amiss. And he thought he could guess what Hermione would bring up.

"Harry, what is this with house elves? I couldn't find many books on them in the library, so I don't understand."

He'd been right. Harry ran his fingers slowly through his hair and waved Hermione into the seat next to him. The Common room was all but empty and he leaned over to talk to her quietly.

"Hermione, house elves are a race of their own, with their own magic and ideals. They have, for a very long time, been the servants of witches and wizards. A very long time. During that time, they've developed their very servile attitude towards us."

Hermione frowned, but Harry waved it aside. "It's not really slavery, Hermione, or it's not the same. From what I've heard, it's ...I don't know. Hermione, the house elves have never complained."

"Do they know they can complain?" Hermione snapped.

Harry grinned. "Usually when they do it's about a wizard not letting them do their work. It's what they live to do; it would be like taking a – a plough horse off the field because you don't want to make it work. It's what they live for."

"And what about vacations and sick leave and pensions?" She demanded.

Harry tapped his chin. "I really don't know. Honestly, Hermione, I've never questioned it."

"You should!" She snapped.

Harry raised his hands defensively. "I am now, Hermione. You would see better than I because you're looking from an outside point of view. I've never seen a sick elf, Hermione, so they either just don't get sick or if they do, they take care of each other and take themselves out. I don't think they'd want a vacation: If you didn't have to, would you vacation from Hogwarts?" Her silence was more answer than he'd expected to have. "This is what they want. In our household, old house elves are moved into lighter work. They don't work if they simply can't, and they handle those choices themselves."

"And what about other households?"

Harry closed his mouth and thought carefully, looking at the wall for a long moment. Hermione began to tap her foot before he answered. "Hermione, do you suppose Draco has a happy home life?"

She blinked. "What does this have to do with house elves?" She asked.

"Just answer."

"I suppose he'd be doted on at home," She ventured. "He seems to expect it everywhere."

"He probably is. But I'll be that if he comes home with a grade lower than the best, or with failure in anything I wouldn't be surprised if Lucius beat him." Harry spat in the fireplace in disgust. "How do you expect a house elf would be treated in a house where even the heir is abused?" Hermione's mouth opened and closed, but Harry continued. "People can't choose their homes, and with the purebloods holding as much sway as they do, people can't escape even if they want to. They're wedded to their old-fashioned ideals and they grow in them, thinking they're flourishing but only seeing the small space they were given, never imagining they could be more. What you're griping about is only a small problem in the entirety of our society, one that hasn't changed and probably won't anytime soon. Can you imagine making a difference for a creature taken for granted in a world where not even the aristocracy is safe?" Harry whispered just loud enough for Hermione to hear. "I admire your candour and zeal, but Hermione, look at the bigger picture for this one." Harry turned and looked at her, knowing she'd see the bleak expression on his face. "I think there's more that needs changing than just the treatment of one humble race."

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Classes continued and Hermione began spending an unnerving amount of time in the library, looking through back corners and shadowy shelves. He didn't ask what she was looking for, but it did cut down on the amount of time he felt safe sitting there with Alan. Alan merely gave him a small nod when he explained and went back to his book, his look of preoccupation ever-present. He seemed thinner and worried; Harry hadn't yet asked, although he had a strong inkling as to just what might be the problem. Alan had told him a lot about himself last year, and Harry felt very glad to have that trust, a trust he'd returned in kind and he exercised by not prying.

Besides, Alan would harangue him if he asked a question he could work out for himself.

However, it wasn't just Alan and Hermione that turned the beginning weeks into worry: Professor Moody came in one class and looked them all over with a firm eye.

"Dumbledore asked me to show you all what it feels like to be under the Imperius. I'll be casting it on you each in turn, to see if you can throw it off.

Hermione immediately raised her hand; Moody gave her a short nod as he cleared the desks off to the sides of the room. "But, sir, you said it was illegal ... using it against another human being was a life sentence in Azkaban ..."

"It's very illegal." Moody growled. "Despicable curse. But you have to know, and I'm in a position to show you what it's like. If you'd rather face it first at the end of the wand of someone who means ill, then you're free to leave. I won't harm nothing of you but your pride. None of the others willing to use this will give you that courtesy."

Hermione fell silent and remained in class. Neville was pale, but determined.

Moody went through everyone in class alphabetically. Seamus got into a false swordfight with an invisible opponent. Lavender screamed like a banshee. Hermione strutted about and asked Ron for a tissue. Then Moody came to Neville. Neville relaxed for several long moments, and then tripped when he went to walk forward, landing hard on his forearms as he tried to regain himself. He didn't move after that, but Harry could see tension lining his shoulders. Finally, he rolled onto his back, staring blankly at the ceiling as he started singing without coherent words. After nearly five minutes – much longer than anyone else had been under – Moody raised his wand with a wide grin.

"Good fight, Longbottom, good fight. Would you like to try and beat it? You almost got through."

Neville shook his head quickly and went back to his seat, tucking one leg up against his chest and staring into space. Harry touched his shoulder and gave him a wide smile that Neville slowly returned before looking down once more. In short order, it was Harry's turn.

Harry stood at the front and waited for the curse to hit. When it did, it was unmistakable and blissfully pleasant. There wasn't a worry in his head. But why did that make every sense he had thrum sickeningly?

'Step forward and jump.' A voice commanded, pleasant and sweet.

Harry felt himself step forward, and then threw himself against the command, taking the fall in a roll. A sharp bang later, and he woke up, the pain in his head doubling and Moody's laughter echoing off the walls.

"Well done it, Potter, well done! Step forward, you need to try again."

Harry stood reluctantly, and glanced around. Most of the students were talking to each other in excitement, but Neville was watching him intently. Reluctantly, Harry stepped forward and the bliss settled over him again. This time, although his conscious worry left, his body was still taut and ready to move, waiting to break through the fog and its commands. When the words came, he was ready.

'Sit down,'

"No." Harry said, shaking his head. The movement threw off his balance, and he almost fell as the fog left. He staggered, and then flinched from Moody's raucous laughter.

"Well said, Potter. Take your seat; you just threw it off twice. I'm glad to see it, really glad."

Harry sat next to Neville and Neville gave him a strong smile, his leg going back down to the floor. The rest of the class continued with no others quite up to refusing. Moody reassured Ron he did feel him fighting, but that he needed work on his conviction and constant vigilance. Ron griped about how was he going to be vigilant if he lost

his hearing to all of Moody's yelling, but he certainly didn't say it in Moody's vicinity.

This was, of course, one thing on top of the rest of their assignments. Teachers were piling on their work as they neared their OWL year, and although Ron griped about the extra work, with Neville and Hermione both in their group, his reluctance was minor and he was overruled. In most of their classes, Hermione and Neville were head to head on their scores, although Harry beat out both of them in Defence. Ron was the only one who didn't spend copious amounts of time in the library, so he was the least likely to have his reading done, and all four of them were more than a little annoyed with Snape's insistence on learning antidotes. Alan had reassured Harry that poisoning a student wasn't really allowed, so they were safe unless Snape was careful about which poison to use and what antidotes he had on hand. Harry asked for a more foolproof way to not be poisoned, and Alan told him to research something like basilisk poison, to which Harry glared at him, knowing there was only one antidote to that. Alan raised his eyebrow, and Harry pulled down the book of poisons in their corner. This, of course, led to a very uncomfortable confrontation with Neville.

Neville spent about the same amount of time in the library as Hermione, and he easily waylaid Harry on his way to the back corner. He didn't ask where Harry was going, but he did step beside him and ask to speak to him. Harry swallowed and led Neville to a near corner that was almost as secluded and just as dark, that didn't have Alan there. Neville sat easily, propping up the extra reading on summoning charms, and then casually addressing Harry.

"Your attitude has changed through last year, Harry." Harry tried not to react, but it didn't look like Neville was watching him. "You're becoming more Slytherin."

Harry really did flinch. "Neville ..."

"Don't bother. I don't want an explanation – not yet. I just want to know what I'm seeing for what it is." He set his book down and looked over at Harry. "You're reticent and a good liar, which you never were before. Don't think I haven't noticed; you haven't tried it on me, but

I've seen you do it to Hermione and Ron a lot. They don't know you like I do. You're also hiding your emotions, which you're doing right now. You told me in second year that you didn't like doing that because it hindered communication. You picked it up somewhere last year. You picked up a lot last year, including a lot of self-confidence." Neville glanced aside. "You're also manipulating Snape a lot better. I can see why you're suddenly so sure about researching Valendicia. He won't be willing to use it on a student, will he? It's very similar to basilisk poison, and thus similar to what nearly killed his son."

Harry carefully blanked his face, knowing that no matter reaction he had it would give something away. He couldn't think of how to direct Neville elsewhere with this, so he remained silent, waiting to see where Neville was going. Neville put his face in his hands and breathed.

"Something's going on, Harry, and I can't see what it is."

"I don't want to explain myself, Neville. Not right now."

"Not yet." Neville corrected. "You're getting information somewhere, and my guess would be it's in the library. Probably where you were going before I waylaid you. What are you doing, conversing in secret with Prince himself?" Harry appreciated that he still used Prince even when Alan's growth had made his parentage more than obvious. Some griping students didn't bother, and called him 'Snape' with disdain. He also appreciated that Neville stopped him from having to answer immediately thereafter. "You know, don't answer that, Harry. Just share with me your reasoning for the comfort of choosing a poison I won't have used on me and don't bother worrying about sources. I trust you."

"So you don't want to know how I know what I know?" Harry asked playfully. Neville graced him with a rude gesture, and Harry laughed lightly. "Snape is limited in the poisons he can use; pick one destructive or difficult, and he can't use it on you. He has to have a back-up antidote in case ours don't work."

Neville nodded slowly. "So what kinds of defences are there for Valendicia? I'd never even heard of that one before."

Harry grinned. "Very few. Pick something a little easier, like strychnine."

Neville rolled his eyes. "Muggle poison, Potter. No antidote. I want to practice defending against magical poisons, not muggle ones that don't even have an antidote."

"Fine by me. So, you going to tie me down here, or what?"

"Yes." Neville said firmly, standing up and gathering his books. "You're not allowed to leave. You must stay here, even though I don't plan on returning to check on you and you will sleep at this table until, oh, say next week?"

Harry nodded seriously. "Yes sir." He then stood and walked away from the table before Neville even left. Neville threw a token complaint and wandered off in silence as Harry went into the nook where Alan was seated with his Charms book and pulled up a seat. Alan looked over his book at him with a faint smirk.

"Nice chatting job. Longbottom seems to trust you a lot."

Harry nodded. "We're practically brothers. We were raised together, like you and Andrew."

Alan's mouth twitched into a rare smile that had no malice in it. "Indeed. You have your brother and I have mine. And I am to you ...?" He asked.

Harry enjoyed it when Alan was that open with him. He smiled warmly back. "A best friend. Closer than anyone else save Neville. I'd say you two were about equal. He knows my past, but you know my present."

"A gift indeed." Alan turned back to his book, but Harry set his on the table with a faint frown.

"Hey, did Moody use the Imperius on your class too?"

Alan froze for a long moment, and then set his own book down with a tight expression. "Yes." He answered curtly.

Harry looked over his expression, and decided asking questions about why wouldn't be appreciated, so he continued his previous line. "Did anyone break it?"

"I did." Alan admitted. "It wasn't hard; I hate being out of control." He sneered. "Draco couldn't do anything about it. Blaise fought it, but didn't win and so did a few others. Daphne, for one."

Harry nodded slowly. "I broke it." Alan looked at him in surprise. "It wasn't hard," Harry mimicked, and Alan grinned. "Neville managed to fight it; Ron tried, but failed. It's not a nice curse."

"It isn't." Alan added. "If you can't fight it, you'll happily do what your told and then wake up knowing that you did all of it without a qualm. Imagine looking around your home and knowing that you were the one who killed everyone there in happy obedience to the little voice in your head."

Harry shuddered. "That must be hard to think about."

Alan nodded slowly. "He's not proud of it."

"You wouldn't accept him if he were, Alan." Harry said with conviction. Alan looked at him in surprise, and then smiled slowly, warmly. Harry felt a thrill of success; He'd gotten Alan to truly smile twice in a row. "Your dad really isn't that bad, is he?"

Alan's smile became an amused smirk. "Well, it all depends on whether he can remember that you're your own person or your father or not. He's managing, so long as you remember to do your own projects and not the ones your father suggests. You're really different, though. He told me once he likes your pendant."

Harry blinked and fingered the heavy snake around his throat. He'd taken to wearing it this week, after his father had written to him, talking excitedly about the ministry and the successful incarceration of the Death Eaters, several of whom were marked ones who had

claimed the Imperius after the last war. Others were just supporters who had enjoyed seeing the revelry they'd never had the guts to engage in before. Feeling proud of his father, Harry had pulled it out to wear it for him. To hear that Severus liked it was surprising.

Alan watched his face and smiled. "It's good workmanship, and the snake is gorgeous."

That line didn't come out as English. Harry could understand it perfectly, but the words in his ears were thin hissing. Alan was speaking parseltongue while staring at the serpent and Harry, and Harry responded in kind, "Thank you."

Alan shook his head and turned back to his book. Harry pulled open his own and read as well. When the time finally ran around to the time to leave, Alan flinched slightly and Harry put his book down. "Are you alright, Alan?"

Alan nodded shortly. "Just a headache. I've had them for a while now. They don't last, not really." His hand was touching the right side of his face, and Harry frowned darkly.

"I don't like that, Alan."

"My dad and uncle know."

With that reassurance, Harry settled. If those two couldn't handle what was happening, then there wasn't anything to be done about it. Looking at the time, Harry packed his bags, saluted Alan, and left for Ancient Runes.

A/N: See, I do love you people. Updating Wednesday night again. Enjoy the chapter, please Read & Review! I love hearing your opinions, makes me confident in my choice to continue this story. I'm glad so many of you like the characters of mine I've brought in; please feel free to mention what you like, or, indeed what you dislike. While I may not change it, it will help me keep them level, and I value every honest opinion I can get. If you don't review, I won't know what you do or don't like.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Seventeen

A week before the expected arrival of the other schools, a notice went up in the Entrance Hall. In the time after, the castle seemed to clean itself up in less time than you would expect for such a large castle. The suits of armour gleamed; the portraits ran about to try and not get rubbing spotless, and the talk of the school was the Tournament and nothing else. The teachers seemed to grow a little fierce as well, snapping at failure more harshly than ever before. Ron startled Neville into messing up his spell and got detention for that evening with a threat to never do that in front of any of the other schools. Neville glowered and reversed his mistake before repeating the spell perfectly and leaving without speaking to him. They made up the next morning, and then October thirtieth came. The Great Hall was spotless and decked in silk hangings representing the different houses and the combined badge of the school.

Classes were nigh pointless with none of the students paying any attention to what was going on. Potions was probably the most well behaved class, but with it a half-hour shorter, there was a limit on what they could do. Finally, however, they were released and went upstairs to drop their bags and return to go outside and wait. Harry felt very offended that he was too short to see clearly, and that they'd placed a girl in front of him so as to not block him completely. He was amused to see that it was Ginny. Harry didn't join in the speculation too actively, and when Dumbledore announced the arrival, he watched, poking and jibing Ron and Neville as the large powder-blue carriage landed.

A boy jumped out and dropped the steps before stepping respectfully back to allow for a very tall, very fine woman to step out. Harry had to wonder just by how much the inside of that carriage was expanded to allow for her and the students who followed to remain comfortably inside, as she was quite comparable to Hagrid in size. When Dumbledore respectfully greeted her, he barely had to tilt his head to kiss her hand. The Beauxbatons group slipped inside, and then the waiting began for the Durmstrang crowd. Harry was slightly apprehensive, although he could think of several questions he'd like to ask. Durmstrang had a reputation for being Dark and, as any child, he was curious about what he didn't know.

The large sucking sound drew his eyes to the lake, and he was greatly impressed at the boat that rose from beneath the water. The disembarking went by, but when he took a good look at Karkaroff he felt his mouth curl: his parents hadn't been silent about the Death Eaters that weren't in Azkaban for whatever reason they'd managed to get out, and Harry knew of Igor Karkaroff's reputation. That he was Headmaster at Durmstrang did little for its reputation. However, behind Karkaroff was someone that made Harry jump and grin, elbowing Ron excitedly and pointing to the sharp profile of Viktor Krum. Neville hushed Ron, but that only lasted until the Hogwarts students were freed to allow them to move to the Great Hall with the guests.

"Krum, Harry, Viktor Krum!" Ron moaned. Harry laughed, and Hermione rolled her eyes, looking disdainfully at the group of sixth year girls squabbling over lipstick. Ron didn't seem to notice, "Any of you have a quill?"

Harry glanced back at Neville who raised his eyebrow in turn. Harry chuckled and looked forward again. "Good luck in talking Neville into handing it over."

Ron gaped at Neville, and watched as he brushed casually by, giving Harry a discrete and annoyed glance. Sitting at the Gryffindor table, they watched the guests make themselves comfortable.

"Look at them." Hermione grumbled. She pointed to where the Beauxbatons students were settling at the Ravenclaw table. "You'd think it was still freezing and a draughty little shack with the way they're shivering."

The Beauxbatons students were still wrapped in their shawls and scarves. In contrast, the Durmstrang students were shedding their furs to reveal blood red robes and curious faces; they stared around at the enchanted ceiling and the golden settings with interest. Ron looked at their seating at the Slytherin table and snorted angrily.

"Would you look at that, Prince's already warming up to them. I'll bet Krum'll turn him down flat."

Harry looked quickly over to the Slytherin table and found that Ron was apparently seeing wrong. Alan wasn't warming up to Krum; he was avoiding the Durmstrang student seated next to him who appeared to be invading his space for some reason. Talking to Krum seemed to fix that problem rather quickly, as the student subsided with a faint grumble. Krum seemed reluctant to respond.

Professor Dumbledore and the two headmasters entered the room. The Beauxbatons students leapt to their feet as Madam Maxine passed, completely unembarrassed by the attitude of some of the students around them, and only sat when she did. Dumbledore remained standing, turning to face the students.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, ghosts, and –most particularly – guests!" Dumbledore beamed across the hall. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts! I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable!"

One of the Beauxbatons students, still hidden beneath a shawl, gave a short derisive laugh. Hermione hissed, but Neville held her back with a disinterested look.

"The Tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast." Dumbledore said. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"

He sat and Karkaroff immediately leaned forward to engage him in conversation. The tables filled with food, and Harry was delighted to see all the variety the house elves had pulled out. The dishes were filled completely, and there were several that were distinctly foreign. Neville sat forward with interest and moved to sample several unknowns. Harry remained with his staples and only tried a few new dishes.

"What's that?" Ron asked, pointing at the shellfish stew Neville was taking a taste of.

"No clue." Neville said, just as Hermione said, "Bouillabaisse."

“Bless you.” Ron said.

“It’s French.” Hermione patiently explained. “I had it on holiday, summer before last, it’s very nice.”

“I’ll take your word for that.” Ron responded, leaning back to the black pudding. Harry laughed, and Neville nodded slowly, refraining from trying more.

Hagrid came in partway through with a bandaged hand and a wide grin. Shortly thereafter, the girl who’d finally removed her muffler stepped over and asked with a heavy accent, “Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?”

Neville turned and Ron squeaked. Harry turned as well and nodded slowly, lifting the pot into her hands. He was entranced a moment by her silvery hair, and then shook his head slowly. Neville merely shrugged beside him, not looking.

“It was lovely.” Ron beamed. Neville had to stifle a snicker, and the girl left. Harry pulled his eyes from her hair and then rubbed them quickly. Ron gulped, and stared longer.

“She’s a veela.”

“Of course she isn’t.” Hermione snapped. “I don’t see anyone else gaping like an idiot.”

She silenced as Neville pointed several others out who were staring deeply, and then Neville shrugged again. “I’d say part veela, possibly.”

“She’d definitely not normal!” Ron breathed, leaning aside to keep an eye on her. “They don’t make them like that at Hogwarts!”

“That’s because you’re not looking.” Neville returned, his gaze returned to his plate.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and looked up. “Well, when you’ve put your eyes back in you can see who just arrived.”

Harry and Neville both looked up at the table at once, and found themselves looking at one stranger and one person they recognized. Beside Professor Karkaroff was Mr. Bagman, and next to Madam Maxine was a round-faced, lean man with light brown hair, wearing a proper suit in an eye-catching dark orange, almost brown, with scarlet piping. He was smiling and talking pleasantly with the woman, with a face that was quick to smile. Harry nodded slowly.

"I think that's Kenner Templar, Crouch's replacement. I heard he's a nice man." Harry answered slowly. Neville nodded, and Ron shrugged.

Pudding arrived and Ron tried to draw the girl over again with strange blancmange, but she didn't come and neither Harry nor Neville commented on it; Hermione's snort was enough. Finally, the plates cleared, and all eyes turned to Dumbledore as excitement built in the air. Fred and George were watching him intently, and Dumbledore spread his hands with a warm smile as he looked over the eagerly attentive room.

"The time has come. The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket just to clarify the procedure we will be following this year. First, let me introduce the newly appointed Mr. Kenner Templar," Kenner stood and bowed promptly, giving everyone a bright smile, "taking over for Mr. Crouch as Head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation," Pleasant applause followed, as the students were heartened by his pleasantly eager face, "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

The applause for him was much louder, either from his fame as a Beater or his far showier acknowledgement of waving and grinning. Dumbledore continued.

"Mr. Templar has done wonderfully to pick up from where Mr. Crouch left off, and he and Mr. Bagman will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxine on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts." The attention in the room palpably sharpened,

and Dumbledore acknowledged it with a smile. “The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch.”

Mr. Filch moved from the far shadows carrying a large chest decorated with enough jewels to make it look tawdry. A murmur of interest moved through the gathered students, as Filch walked up with the old-looking chest.

“The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been looked over by Mr. Templar and Mr. Bagman, and the necessary arrangements have been made and double-checked.” Dumbledore continued as Mr. Filch placed the chest on the table between himself and Dumbledore. “There will be three tasks for the champions, spaced throughout the school year that will test the champions in different ways … their magical prowess … their daring … their powers of deduction … and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.”

Silence fell throughout the room, and Harry breathed slowly, turning carefully in his seat to glance over at Alan. Alan was watching Dumbledore through half-lidded eyes, playing on his plate with his knife. He was very tense, and Harry had finally remembered why.

“As you know, three champions participate in the tournament, one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total at the end of task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector … the Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times on the top of the casket. When the lid opened, he reached inside and removed from within a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It was largely unremarkable except for the fact that it was filled completely with dancing, blue-white flames. The cup was placed on top of the closed casket, clearly visible to everyone within the Hall.

“Anyone wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly on a slip of parchment and drop it into the Goblet. Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put

their names forward. Tomorrow night, Hallowe'en, the Goblet will return the names of the three it judges most worthy to represent their schools. The Goblet will be placed in the Entrance Hall tonight where it will be freely accessible to those who wish to compete.

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," Dumbledore gazed solemnly over the students, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the Entrance Hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete this Tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once the Goblet of Fire has selected a champion, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the Goblet constitutes a binding magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become champion. Please be very sure that you are whole-heartedly prepared to participate before you drop your name into the Goblet.

"Now, I think it is time for bed. Goodnight to you all."

Harry and his friends got up and walked down the table, listening to Fred and George discuss how to get in.

"An Age Line! That should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn't it?" Fred wondered.

"Wouldn't Dumbledore have thought of that?" Neville queried. "That's a pretty obvious cheat, isn't it?"

Fred and George brushed Neville off, much to Neville's annoyance, but Harry reached back to pull him forward as ballast to offset Ron's obsessive search for Viktor Krum. Finally, passing the Slytherin table, Harry heard Karkaroff begin to chivvy his students towards the door. He started to address Krum, and then fell strangely silent. Harry glanced over and saw his eyes had stopped on Alan's face. It lasted only a moment, before Alan jerked his chin up, and stalked away and out the door with the rest of the students, Blaise trailing him. Karkaroff was clearly shaken, but he returned to worrying over Krum once more.

Harry overheard him begin another question about whom he'd been talking to before he split from them and went on up the stairs.

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After breakfast Saturday, at which both Fred and George tested the Age Line and got very nice white beards to show for it, Harry and the others slipped outside to pay Hagrid the courtesy of a visit. All of them were less than happy to hear that the Skrewts were still fine, although fortunately they were now down to twenty of the things, rather than more. Finally, however, it was nearing to the time for the Hallowe'en feast, and they left. Neville shook his head as they followed Hagrid and Madame Maxine in.

"Mental, but fair, I suppose." Neville commented. "They are both cut from the same cloth; I've never seen anyone else their size, so mayhap they're made for each other?"

Harry laughed. "Fair enough statement. They do seem to be birds of a feather."

They entered the Great Hall after the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, and found themselves inside with the place as full as it could ever be. The Goblet was once more resting in front of the staff table, directly before Dumbledore's empty seat, and Harry chose seats right next to the once-more clean-shaven twins who had accepted their disappointment and chosen to direct their energies to hoping for a Gryffindor champion.

The Hallowe'en Feast wasn't as warm, tense, or, indeed, enjoyable as it had been the last few years. With the Goblet before every table, all eyes seemed to be drawn inexorably towards it, and the attention of everyone was divided between their food and the upcoming decision, a decision none of them could wait to hear.

Finally, the plates cleared to spotlessness, the talk escalated and then disappeared as Dumbledore stood. Beside him, the other two Headmasters were watching with the same interest as the rest of the students and Ludo Bagman was smiling and almost bouncing with

excitement. Opposite him, Mr. Templar was resting his chin on his hands with a wide smile, his interest skipping between Dumbledore and the Goblet.

"Well, I suspect the decision is almost at hand. One more minute should be enough." Dumbledore said, completely calm. "Now, when the champions names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber," He indicated the door behind the staff table, "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

Dumbledore gave his wand a great, sweeping wave and the lights went out, leaving the only illumination as the wavering blue flames of the Goblet of Fire. A gentle murmur passed through the Hall, all eyes steadily focused at front on the almost painful Goblet, several people checking watches and shifting with nervous energy.

"Any second now," Lee Jordan whispered.

The flames inside the Goblet turned red. Sparks began to fly, and a tongue of flame grew into the air, supported a scrap of charred parchment. The room gave a collective gasp.

Dumbledore calmly reached forward and plucked the parchment from the flame. He extended his arm to read the parchment by the light of the once more blue-white flames of the Goblet,

"The champion for Durmstrang," Dumbledore announced calmly and clearly, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprise at all!" Ron yelled as tumultuous applause exploded from the gathered students. Harry watched Krum stand and slouch up the Slytherin table to Dumbledore, where he turned and continued on into the room behind the staff.

"Bravo, Viktor!" Karkaroff shouted above the clamour. "Knew you had it in you!"

As Viktor left, the cheering died into expectant silence once more, and the attention returned to the Goblet of Fire. They were not

disappointed; the flames turned red not second later and another tongue of flame shot out, throwing the next name aloft. Dumbledore snatched it and read it out once more,

“The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour!”

Harry was amused to see the veela-like girl stand and sweep back her hair before striding between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables to the top of the hall and along the path Viktor had taken himself. Neville, beside him, snorted.

“Look, they’re all devastated.” He indicated the remaining Beauxbatons students and Harry fought between pity and amusement. Two of those not selected had dissolved into tears, and dropped their heads onto their arms.

Once Fleur Delacour was gone into the room, the silence grew so stiff as to be nearly oppressive. The Hogwarts champion was next ...

The Goblet turned red; Harry felt his hand clench in anticipation that seemed leaden in his stomach as Dumbledore caught the last piece of parchment from the air. He held it back to read it, and paused. Harry felt a tide of dread as he paused so long a short murmur rose before he spoke in a terribly bald tone,

“Alan Prince.”

The silence was deafening. The way Dumbledore had spoken left no doubt as to the complete shock of the announcement; even those who didn’t know the name knew something was wrong. Harry couldn’t see clearly to the Slytherin table, but he didn’t even bother to look. The year before had told him all of Alan’s secrets, and he knew just which one this was that had placed him where he now was.

It left Harry feeling sick.

“Alan Prince,” Dumbledore rumbled, “please come to the front.”

There was a loud clatter, and the silence was so thick he could hear Alan’s sharp footsteps as he stalked to the front. He went to stand

next to Dumbledore and before he could speak, Alan's voice rang across the Hall, shaking with suppressed rage.

"I swear on my magic and history, I did not - enter - my - name."

Harry felt the silence grow even thicker. Dumbledore was staring at Alan, who stood defiantly in front of the staff table, his hands clenched at his sides. Everyone else was staring just as strongly, and a murmur broke out between the tables. Beside him, Ron growled,

"Bloody liar. I'll be he planned this to not get in trouble."

Neville rubbed his nose. "He gave an oath, though. Those are binding; you can't lie. If you do, what you swore by will be denied. Swearing like that, it's said a lie would render you a squib and, on history, he'd lose all claim to any blood status, if his blood didn't just boil. Or so I've read; no one's really ever tested it." Neville snorted. "Nobody wants to risk it being right."

Harry remained silent, watching as Alan glared daggers at Dumbledore, something he could relate to. Finally, feeling the weight of Ron's gaze, Harry sighed, "If he's not lying, then Dumbledore was lax in his security that someone got his name in for him."

Neville froze, and Dumbledore spoke once more.

"Prince, please enter the far room. It appears you are the Hogwarts champion."

Alan's fists released and clenched once more. He didn't move, but growled, "I never wanted this, Professor Dumbledore. You're so bloody arrogant." He spat on the floor, before stalking around the table and through the far door without looking back.

Dumbledore watched him leave, seeming to slump slightly before he turned back to the students. "It appears that an unfortunate miscalculation escaped my notice, but unless there is a change, the Hogwarts champion is Alan Prince." He ignored the angry murmur from most of the students and continued. "I ask that you all give your

greatest support to the champion of your school, and cheer them on in their appointed tasks, giving every ounce of support you can muster. The support of watching and cheering is a very real contribution, and one I expect all of you will take part in and enjoy."

The words fell flat on Harry's ears, and he was distracted from them with worry, a worry that had a name, and a face, and a very real, very frightening reason. Alan Prince was now a part of the Triwizard Tournament, a dangerous game that could likely kill him. He had not entered his name; Harry knew he hadn't, they'd discussed the very thing, and Alan would not have entered himself. He'd even looked impressed coming into the Great Hall that morning, which told him he'd inspected the Age Line and had been happy with it. But he'd been entered all the same. And there was one large, worrisome, and very secret reason that seemed to almost glare across the room, which was several times worse than Alan's headaches:

Alan Prince had been the downfall of Voldemort. The Tournament would make it almost too easy to kill him.

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Alan slammed into the back room and turned and kicked the door. He knew this would happen the day he found out the Tournament was going to happen and he hated it.

"Is there something wrong?" The Beauxbatons girl asked from behind him. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

Alan bit back a laugh as he realized the girl thought he was a messenger. He turned and gave her a bitter smile. "No, Dumbledore just made a mistake and they're dealing with it. They'll come finish their lecture in a moment and the shit will hit the fan."

He got two rather blank looks for his colloquialism but he didn't bother to try and explain, instead he stood with his back to the wall and glared at the door. It wasn't long before it opened and the relevant staff entered. Severus immediately moved to his side and Alan just

shook his head. His father turned and glared at Dumbledore from where he stood.

"I told you to be cautious about this, Dumbledore and you ignored me." Severus said in a low, dangerous voice.

Dumbledore sighed irritably. "Severus, you have not even properly explained about why you were so concerned to begin with; I didn't see your point. Now I see your worries borne out and I'm wondering how Alan managed to be chosen as it is. Magicking the Goblet to choose a specific name –"

"I doubt it was magicked, Albus." Severus snarled. Karkaroff laughed derisively.

"Are you saying that boy knows more magic than your seventh years? Really, Severus, such a doting father you – erk!"

Karkaroff gulped as he was wrenched off his feet and slung into the air. Alan wasn't even looking where his wand was pointed; he'd said nothing. He finally glanced back to Karkaroff and growled, "I was raised by the Alfaerus. They felt a need to give me extra training and I felt a desire to learn, thus I have surpassed the level of formal schooling I can take credit for. I do have an arsenal to nearly rival the seventh years, so it is partially my fault I was chosen." He lifted his wand and Karkaroff crashed to the ground. "However, I neither entered my name nor requested it to be so. I left Severus' quarters once, in the morning with dozens of kids arrayed about the Goblet to get a look at the Age Line, and then to casually eat like any normal child. Ask any of them. I returned afterward. I didn't even consider passing that line. How it happened, I have no clue, but I want out; I don't want to be part of this Tournament, but somehow I don't think I'm going to be getting my way, am I?" He turned back to watching Dumbledore and glared, tilting against the wall to add to his sullen posture.

Dumbledore sighed and inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Mr. Bagman, Mr. Templar? Can Alan be changed for another student?"

"I don't believe so, Mr. Dumbledore." Mr. Templar said calmly. Bagman was watching him and offering nothing. Mr. Templar picked up his bag and removed a thick tome that he flipped through several times, pausing only shortly before he snapped it shut again with an apologetic sigh. "The Goblet will have gone out, having completed its task of selecting the champions. There is no way for another to be chosen or substituted, and the contract will last until the end of the tournament and the gifting of the Triwizard Cup. I'm very sorry about this." He nodded his head slightly to Severus and Alan. "It is indeed an atrocious oversight that a student might be entered against their will."

Dumbledore fixed his glasses on his face and sighed. The other headmasters were also looking uncomfortable, but as Templar had said, the decision was made. Moody shifted firmly.

"You seem afraid this is a danger to you." He grumbled at Severus. "What might make you think that? Possible retaliation, maybe?"

Alan bristled at Moody's tone, but he forced it to remain unseen, his emotions behind a stiff mask. Severus tensed lightly, his hands fisting, but he gave no response either. Finally, Madame Maxine cleared her throat. The noise drew all eyes to her.

"I suppose it is unavoidable that Prince is the Hogwarts champion, even if he is underage. However, I don't see what else can be done. Surely we can continue as we have?"

Severus nodded stiffly and Dumbledore as well. Mr. Templar cleared his throat and gave the room a warm smile.

"Well then, the first task is to be a test of daring. You will be facing a danger unknown, an important quality in a wizard. You must have courage and be on your guard to face anything. The task will be on November twenty-fourth, and will take place in front of a panel of judges and the other students.

"As champions, you cannot ask for help, nor accept help of any kind from teachers for the completion of any of the tasks. You will face the first task with your wand alone. After the first task, the second will be

explained. Due to the demands the Tournament will place upon your time, you are excused from the end of year tests. Any questions?"

Alan merely shook his head slowly and Mr. Templar nodded and gave Dumbledore a short hint of a bow, turning the talking over to him. Dumbledore smiled at the students, "I believe you are free to return to your beds, then." He turned back to Templar and Bagman and offered them a nightcap. Alan didn't wait to hear about it; he stalked out of the room and heard his father follow behind him. The path he intended was direct and to the point: straight into Severus' office. Once inside, he waited for Severus to close the door and knelt before the floo, tossing in the powder.

"Salem Sorcerer's School!" Alan popped his head into the fire and waited for the spinning to end. Once it did, he opened his eyes and blinked. The desk he could see was empty at the moment, but he could hear someone speaking in the room. Annoyed, he growled, "Excuse me!"

There was a soft gasp and a blonde head shot up over the desk. "Oh, sorry!" The woman began. It was the work of a moment to recognize her: Lyall Wolfgang, teacher of the magical society classes for muggleborns and cursed muggles and sometime receptionist. She skipped around the desk and smoothed her skirt before she knelt in front of him. "I didn't hear it and was cleaning up papers. What's the worry, Alan?"

Alan sighed. "I need Geoffrey over here; keep my godfather out. I can't have him haring over here for this."

Lyall snorted. "I'll keep him if I have to tie him to his bed." Alan raised his eyebrow and she laughed. "I've been practicing! He should have trouble with the knots I have in mind; they're not something he'll have seen before. Gimme a min."

She returned to the desk and depressed a small button. Her voice was official when she spoke. Her words were not. "Geoffrey, you've got a British haemorrhoid reported by your nephew; tie up the fugitive first, then hurry up here."

Alan fought not to laugh. He could imagine the argument resulting from that. Lyall returned to kneeling in front of him and smiled. "So, what's happening this time? More life-threatening situations?"

"Nothing a little acid shouldn't handle." Alan returned. Lyall's eyes widened; the phrase was referring to Alan's mother, and her own attitude. She'd recorded in her journals four instances when a young man named Tom Riddle had approached her about producing him an heir. The first time he'd left after her refusal; the last three she'd tossed prepared potions and acid on him to make him go. Alan had decided that phrase nicely summed up anything that revolved around the bane of his existence.

Lyall huffed. "Good grief. You're just neck deep in trouble, aren't you?"

"Oh, only." Alan returned with a fake smile. He could see Geoffrey coming to the door, so he spoke up slightly as he continued. "The bastard got my name in the Goblet of Fire; I'm stuck participating in the Triwizard Tournament."

Geoffrey let the door shut and swore vividly and loudly. Lyall waiting until he was talking about Fudge-fucking dormice to inform him that the loudspeaker was still on and he was talking loud enough for it to pick it up. He turned an interesting charcoal colour before grumbling about lying receptionists and returning to normal speech to tell her to move away. Alan listened with a brilliant grin. Geoffrey saw it and sighed,

"You are to never use any of those phrases in front of your aunt, you hear me?"

"Yessir." Alan returned.

"Now, the whole story from top to bottom. Tell me."

Alan did, talking about his concerns, his investigations, and his action to remain in Snape's quarters except to fetch breakfast and scope the other students. He relayed everything he could remember, and Geoffrey listened, indicating parts for Lyall to take note of and tapping

his chin with a pen. Finally, after Alan was done, he slipped out of his kneeling pose to sit Indian style and lean on his elbows.

"I don't see what to do, pup. You're stuck in there; I know you can handle yourself and I'm sure you'll do well, maybe even have fun. It's not going to be anything worse than one of Green's ideas."

"Or yours." Alan and Lyall both responded at once. Lyall chuckled, "Really Geoffrey. No matter what you try, the blame for that Jabberwocky is yours."

Geoffrey ducked his head, and tried to repel the accusation. It didn't work, because it was true. Alan listened shortly and tried not to smile too hard. He really wasn't scared about going through the Tournament. He could handle the tasks; he was smart, he had skill, and he was more than willing to face whatever they threw at him. What scared him was that he couldn't see what the plot that had placed his name in the Goblet was. Clearly, since the Goblet wasn't magicked and his name had come out unaided, he was more than up to the Tasks. Why, then, had he been entered? What would the gain be?

Alan couldn't see. And that scared him more than he'd ever admit.

A/N: Thank you for reading. Please review.

The next chapter will go up on the twenty-fourth, hopefully, as I will be away from then until the fifth, and the chapter after that will go up the Thursday following. Thought I'd give you lovely people a heads up. What do you think of my scheduling?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Eighteen

Next Saturday was the first Harry saw of Alan in the library. School had been particularly miserable, and Harry had thought no one could have been feeling worse than him. The entire week had been spent trying not to seem to worried, trying to seem angry with an underage Slytherin champion, trying to agree with the others assessments without garnering Neville's unwanted attention. He didn't think he'd succeeded in the last. Harry wondered how close Neville had come to being a Slytherin but that worry didn't manage to outweigh his concern for Alan. Apparently that concern was valid: Alan looked sick and so thin as to be skeletal. Bags under his eyes left an even greater skeletal impression, and he must have chosen robes slightly too large on purpose to exacerbate the fact. Harry sat across from him with a grimace and didn't pull out a book.

"Alan ..." Harry murmured. Alan put his book down and shut it thickly, looking at Harry blankly. "Are you doing okay?"

A sickly grin twisted his face. "I'm okay." He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "I think not a person in the school is glad for my selection, except for whoever put me forward. They must be dancing with glee at how well this is working." He laughed harshly. "They won't even have to wait for the tasks to finish me off; the other Slytherin's should do the job just fine."

"They haven't ..." Harry began, worried. Alan snorted.

"Why do you think Slytherin's dropped so many points this week? Did you think I missed Potions Friday for the Hell of it? Nah, I got clipped with a bone-breaker fetching my books, and then found that weird poison bomb in my bag. Hospital wing overnight for it."

Harry winced. Alan didn't seem to notice, tilting his chair back on its legs. "I've been getting food direct from the kitchens and using Green's poison analyser on everything I eat after I had to spit out breakfast Tuesday when my pendant heated up. I think Slytherin likes me as a champion less than the rest of the school does ... although that poison might have been Ravenclaw work ..."

Alan trailed off after a good look at Harry's face. He dropped his chair back down, and Harry was surprised at the truly earnest look he wore.

"Harry, I'm going to be fine. The precautions aren't all that unexpected, and the hostility isn't new. Blaise and Lucille Pupp both are making a point of clearing the air, and Severus announced to the common room that if I get attacked once more, he'd put Slytherin at zero and keep us there himself the next month." Alan gave a wry grin, "He did a snapping good job of 'Slytherins must present a united front to the school, and do not turn upon each other for any reason whatsoever.' He gave me a pointed look for that one too. I honestly wasn't glaring at Draco that much, though." He defended. Harry just laughed lightly. Alan and Draco did not get along, and it wasn't a secret. Harry nodded at the reassurance.

"I suppose you can handle it. Good practice, at least." Harry offered. Alan nodded slowly, but it didn't remove the earnest expression; Alan wanted him to relax about it. Harry smiled weakly. "I trust your dad will take care of you, Alan. He won't let you come to harm."

"He won't." Alan allowed. "Thank you."

Harry inclined his head lightly, and ducked to fetch his bag and his own work. They settled silently into casual camaraderie as they usually did. Harry knew Alan noticed the short glances he kept shooting at him out of concern, but his only reaction was a small amused smile.

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The next week was no better for Harry, but Alan's colour returned to normal and he didn't miss any more classes. He returned to eating in the Great Hall, although attending to his food looked extremely strenuous from what Harry could see. The school was slowly settling into sullen acceptance of Alan, and that Friday seemed to settle the matter of his position, as Draco started in on him before on Potion's class.

"You really are an attention whore, Prince."

Harry came up with Ron and the others behind him, overhearing the thrown barb. Once they rounded the corner, however, they walked clean into a firestorm, not a sound coming from Alan's mouth as three spells ran straight past them. Harry immediately threw up a silent shield his father had taught him, a spell that was auror-quality, but it wasn't in time, and behind him, Hermione squealed painfully.

"Ron, check Hermione." Harry ground through his teeth, keeping his attention on his shield. Alan had seen them, now, and was correcting his aim, but Draco had his back to them, and kept skipping in place. Only a few more spells were thrown, and ricocheted, before Snape stormed down the corridor like a vengeful demon.

"Enough!" He snapped. "Alan, Draco, both of you hand over your wands and get into my office immediately. Anyone caught in the crossfire, come here."

Harry dropped the shield and turned, biting back his first response as he saw Hermione's condition. Her front teeth were crawling down to the neck of her shirt, and she was whimpering and covering them with her hands. Harry grimaced.

"None of the rest of you were hit?" Behind his friends were the rest of the Gryffindor class, all of who hadn't been in the way. Once reassured that the others were safe, Harry took a deep breath and grabbed Hermione's hand. Dealing with Snape wasn't going to be easy, and if he said one thing wrong, Alan would just have to forgive him for hexing his father. Hermione followed reluctantly as Harry approached the gathered Slytherins with their own casualties. A break opened, and Harry situated himself inside it, looking up at Snape with forced casualness.

"Professor, Hermione was caught with a teeth-growing spell." He spoke with a firm look, hoping Snape would catch the expectation in his eyes.

Severus, however, paused and opened his mouth. Harry flashed him a vicious grin and spoke over him.

"You said we should bring any collateral damage to you, sir, if they'd been caught in Prince and Malfoy's fight."

Severus grimaced. "Come here, then, Mrs. Granger, and let me see." Hermione cautiously stepped forward, but didn't remove her hands. Harry moved to her other side, placing himself between her face and the Slytherins, before he gently pulled her hands down. Hermione's teeth had continued to grow, and Snape sighed. "I can't fix this here; please head up to Madam Pomfrey. Potter, I expect you back in class in ten minutes. Escort her."

Harry glared at him, and led Hermione back up the hall. He jerked his head to send Neville and Ron inside and continued with his assignment. He'd have to run to get back to the class in ten minutes, but he could make it. Neville would take his bag in for him.

Harry got back to class with not a minute to spare, and he was in and seated. Neville, beside him, sighed heavily, jerking his head to indicate Collin Creevey bouncing nervously on his heels at the doorway; Severus, Alan and Draco weren't back yet either. Harry raised his eyebrows, and Neville sighed.

"He's here for Alan. Something about a ceremony and a photo shoot for the champions."

Harry grimaced. Not two minutes later, the door to Snape's office slammed open and Draco and Alan strode out, followed by a dark-faced Severus. Upon seeing Collin, he fixed him with a firm glare.

"What do you want?"

"Sir, I was sent to fetch Alan Prince for a ceremony for the champions."

"Surely it can wait." Severus growled low.

"I was said to take him now ..."

"Fine, leave your things here, Prince."

"He needs to take his stuff with him ..." Collin was wilting under the vicious glare he was receiving, but Harry could feel no sympathy for him. Across the room, Alan was gently thumping his head against his desk, before he just stood and quickly crossed the room to pass Harry and leave through the door, not waiting for Collin, his bag slung angrily across his shoulder. Collin ran after him, and the door shut with a very final sounding thud.

Looking back to the front of the class, Harry felt a shiver of nervousness. Severus Snape was a jet-black thunderhead, and he felt that the storm was about to break. This would not be a pleasant class.

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Alan only stopped to allow Collin to pass him once he felt calm enough to not hex the boy from behind for dragging him out of class. The boy looked like he wanted to ask him several questions at once, but a fierce glare that brought out the best of Alan's resemblance to his father shut him up quickly and sent him loping ahead to bring him to the room upstairs. Alan stepped inside and Collin darted off, leaving him there with his dark expression. Let everyone know that he was having a bad day; misery simply loves company.

The school Heads, Mr. Bagman and Mr. Templar sat behind the desks lined along the far wall, Bagman talking to a witch dressed in brilliant magenta robes. In a corner, Krum was sulking alone and Fleur was standing by the door, shooting annoyed glances in Krum's direction. Off to one side, a man with a smoking camera was shooting looks at Fleur; looks that Alan was sure were the cause of her upset.

Mr. Bagman turned and suddenly smiled brightly, a smile that faltered faintly as Alan scowled at him. "Wonderful!" He determinedly beamed. "We were thinking you'd never make it, Alan."

"Call me Prince, sir." Alan ground out. Bagman didn't seem to notice, but just to his right Mr. Templar coughed lightly into his hand, smothering a faint smile. He tapped Bagman on the shoulder, and then stood himself.

"If you'll forgive Mr. Bagman, Prince," He gave a smile he apparently thought would be reassuring; Alan was in too foul a mood to care, "we're here to conduct the wand-weighing ceremony, to ensure all three of you have your wands in top working order.

"My wand is fine." Alan snapped. "I don't need you and yours to tell me that, Mr. Templar. Let's get this over with." He shrugged irritably, and Mr. Templar's smile faded into a sigh as he settled back into his seat.

Dumbledore stood in his stead, and gently tapped the desk. Alan moved out of the direct path to the door and leaned against the wall beside it, partially opposite where Fleur had been pouting. As Dumbledore drew their attention, however, she straightened and stepped forward. Krum remained stationary as well, merely turning to watch. Dumbledore seemed unaware of the two faintly hostile champions and continued with a bright smile.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander." Dumbledore began. Alan quickly scanned the room and felt a muscle in his eye twitch as he suddenly spotted him by a window. He was pale, with large eyes and a small stature. He remembered Harry talking about Ollivander when discussing his wand, and the unusual traits it possessed. Alan had been as fascinated with the brother wand feature as Harry had been with Alan's core.

"He will be checking your wands to ensure they are in good condition before the tournament." Dumbledore finished. Ollivander stepped from the wall and further into the room, running his eyes calmly across the three champions.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, if we could have you forward first please?" He was now in the centre of the room, and, at her name, Fleur swept forward to pass over her wand. Ollivander took it gently, and twirled it between his fingers. The wand emitted a number of pink and gold sparks before Ollivander brought it up close to his face and looked it over carefully.

"Yes," He murmured, "nine and a half inches ... inflexible ... rosewood, containing ... dear me ..."

"A hair from the head of a veela." Fleur said proudly. "One of my grandmuzzer's."

"Yes, of course." Said Ollivander. "I've never used veela hair myself, I find it makes for rather temperamental wands. However, if it suits you, it's often best. The whole purpose of the tool ..."

Ollivander ran his hands down the length of the wood, checking for nicks or bumps, and then he tapped it against his palm, muttered Orchideus and a bouquet of flowers appeared from the end. Ollivander smiled faintly, bundled the flowers together and handed them to Fleur as he dismissed her with a calm, "Fine working order, indeed. Mr. Krum, you next please."

Krum slouched forward and thrust his wand into Ollivander's grasp, standing sullenly beside him with his hands thrust into his pockets. Ollivander took the wand with the same delicacy he'd grasped Fleur's and quickly looked it over.

"Hmmm, this is a Gregorovitch creation if I'm not mistaken. A fine wandmaker, but the styling is never quite ... however, yes ..." He lifted the wand to his eyelevel and looked it over with his fine attention to details. "Hornbeam and dragon heartstring, yes ..." His eyes slid to Krum and then back to his wand. "Rather thicker than one usually sees ... quite rigid ... ten and a quarter inches ... avis."

The wand blasted like a gun and a bunch of small twittering birds flew from the resultant smoke and into the watery sunlight.

"Good," Ollivander said with relish. He then fixed Alan with his strange gaze. "Mr. Prince, then?"

Alan stiffly pushed off the wall and stalked over to him. Once there, he pulled his wand from his wrist and handed it to him handle first. Ollivander reached for it, and paused an inch away.

"Please remove the enchantments for me, Mr. Prince?" Ollivander asked casually, withdrawing his hand minutely. "And if you have a second wand, I'd like to look at that as well."

Alan took his wand back with a faint smile and ran his left index down its length. "I only have one wand, although I snatched a friend's off him for the evening. Would you like to look it over too? I might steal it for one of the tasks sometime."

Ollivander took his wand when he extended it this time, and turned his eye to it as he responded. "If you'd like me to take a moments look I certainly could, although taking a friend's wand isn't normal etiquette you know."

"He's only in Potions. It's antidotes; he shouldn't need it and he let me take it, besides."

Ollivander raised his eyebrows again, and returned to eyeing the wand. "An American wood, redwood, but your accent said as much." Alan merely shrugged. "Eleven inches, flexible ... your core ..."

"Jabberwocky tongue." Alan drawled. "It's a tad uncommon."

The silence in the room was palpable, and Alan smirked. The incident with the jabberwocky had been profitable in the end, but it didn't make it any less stupid.

Ollivander looked at Alan for a long moment before he turned back to eyeing the wood. He got a rather irritated look when he found several burns and a small series of pockmarks, but he finally just sighed heavily and twitched the wand with a subtle twitch. A piercing whistle rang out, and Ollivander dropped the wand quickly. He stepped back as Alan snatched it out of the air and gave him a fierce glare.

"I had asked you to remove your enchantments." Ollivander snapped.

"I did." Alan responded blithely. "That one wasn't one of mine. However, I can disable it for a moment." Alan did so and handed it over once more. Ollivander shook his head, and conjured a short illusion of a cat gambolling about before handing it back over with a faint smile.

"The wand and the enchantments upon it work fine. Would you still like me to glance over the wand of your friend?"

Alan nodded and pulled the thin wood out of his pocket, handing it over end first once more. Ollivander took it shortly and frowned as he looked it over. He spoke the qualities in a faint murmur none could hear, and then gently conjured silvery bubbles from the end. He handed it back with a short nod, but then held on as Alan grasped it in turn. His expression was dead serious.

"I never would have expected such friends, Mr. Prince." The emphasis on his name left his knowledge of Alan's lineage plain. Alan had hoped he wouldn't remember whom he'd sold the wand to, but he guessed his lack of any colour to his skin should have made his preoccupation obvious. Ollivander held on for several moments longer before he left go with a faint, "Take care."

Alan didn't think he meant to keep himself safe. Pocketing the Holly and phoenix feather wand, Alan nodded tersely, and then glanced over at the predatory woman in magenta and the photographer. He grimaced; such attention was not on his list of things to do. Dumbledore stood, prepared to dismiss them, but Bagman stood before Alan could cross the threshold and demanded photos. Trying to relax his back was futile; the ordeal of being yanked about into various poses was intolerable. Finally, however, they were released. Before he could make the door again, a red-taloned hand grasped his shoulder and he turned to look at the brilliant blonde reporter in magenta with a grimace. Wishing he could have hit his growth even three months sooner, Alan looked about an inch or so up into her eyes and glared with all the might he could muster. It didn't even dent her hairpiece. Then again, that could probably survive a sledgehammer.

"Mr. Prince?" She crooned. "Might I have a word with you?"

Alan looked her over once more and felt a suspicion nag at his mind. "Depends on how honest my words will remain once they're on your notepad." He hedged.

"I'm Rita Skeeter, reporter for the Daily Prophet." She elaborated. "Your comments on this tournament would be wonderfully appreciated. Underage champion, how you got in, your regards to you father, Professor Snape ... is there any favouritism from that?" She asked once more. Alan watched her face as she spoke and felt he'd sooner deal with an honest predator, like Hagrid's skrewts or that jabberwocky again.

"Ms. Skeeter." Alan bit off. "I'm not speaking to reporters. I'm going to supper. Leave. Me. Be." Alan pulled from her grasp and stalked out the door, walking quickly down the hall and leaving the rabid reporter behind. He had a sinking feeling that wouldn't be the last of her.

However, first he had to return Harry's wand. He'd snatched it on his way out of Potions, and he should be missing by about this point. In the entire interest of not worrying his friend longer than he had to, and not in the least ensuring that the reporter could try to stop him again, Alan broke into a lopede down the castle halls, skipping down the stairs quickly. As he'd rather anticipated, supper had already begun and at the doors Harry was waiting with a glare already tracking his progress. Only a few seventh years were wandering by, and Alan quickly arrested his pell-mell pace to stroll down the stairs. He made to walk in without saying anything to Harry, but Harry quickly put his hand out and grabbed his shoulder. Alan stopped, and raised his eyebrow.

"Prince, I believe you have something of mine." Harry reported coolly.

Alan looked bewildered. "I have nothing of yours, Potter. I wouldn't touch your things if you paid me."

Harry ignored Alan's sneer and jerked his chin up. Alan observed he was probably being antsy about the height difference once more. Alan was already three inches taller than him with no stop in his growth.

"My wand, then?" Harry asked in the same cool voice. Several people walking near them froze. Taking someone else's wand, much less the wand of someone you weren't close to was a grave breach of etiquette.

Alan just smiled, slipped the wand from his pocket and offered it to Harry handle first. Harry reached for it, paused, and glared straight into Alan's eyes. Harry knew about the enchantments Alan used on his wands, and it was a smart decision to hesitate. Alan pressed the wood into Harry's hand and let go with another mocking smirk, before striding through the doors. Harry stalked through beside him, purposefully not looking at him and hissing something under his breath, audible only to Alan.

"You will teach me your personal enchantments one of these days, Alan." Harry griped.

Alan kept his amusement from his voice. "Yes, I will."

Harry spun on his heel to return to his own table, and Alan slipped into his seat beside Blaise and across from the sixth year Lucille Pupp. A glance proved at least two people were watching him eagerly, and Alan fought the desire to put his head into his hands. Time to run the poison gauntlet once more. Although he was quite confident none of the poisons would kill him, he didn't want to get sick. He just hoped they'd die down by the next week. They weren't going to get a new 'champion' just because he was sick.

Otherwise he'd have engineered a sickness himself.

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The Hogsmeade weekend before the first task seemed to come a lot sooner than Harry would have liked, and the trip was nowhere near as enjoyable as it might otherwise have been. Alan had said he wasn't going to go, because he really just wanted to try and look through a few more books he might need to know. Thus Harry was forcing himself to look cheerful when he knew even Ron and Hermione were picking up on his nervousness. Neville had given up on asking why he was out of sorts and just drove the conversation however it would go, effectively keeping Ron and Hermione from asking questions. Partway along, Hagrid trundled in and sat down with Moody. When they got up to leave, Hagrid came over to their table and smiled, leaning down to whisper between Harry and Neville.

"Come to my hut at eleven tonight; I want to show you something. You'll like it."

He then straightened, and asked in his normal voice, "What'cha kids up to this weekend, then?"

Neville smiled and winced, and Harry leaned back. "We're just hanging out, Hagrid. What were you talking with Moody about?"

"Nothing much," Hagrid inched his eyes away and looked mildly guilty. Harry shook his head slowly.

"Good to hear, then." Harry succeeded in fighting down his laughter. "Good to hear. You heading back up, then? We'll probably come down for tea or something tonight, you know?"

"That'd be wonderful." Hagrid beamed. "It's getting cold, though, so remember your cloak." The emphasis was unmistakeable, and Harry hoped everyone chalked it up to Hagrid's eccentricity.

Harry nodded, and then waved him out of the pub before turning back to the others and holding his head in his hands. "I feel like some pixie is taking a hatchet to my skull from the inside."

"You're stressed, Harry." Neville snapped. "Go figure. What might Hagrid want us for, and what cloak?" He insisted. Ron and Hermione watched with amusement, and Harry turned slightly to face Neville before raising his hand in a one-finger salute. Ron snorted; Neville was unaffected, and his expression didn't change.

"Fine." Harry groused. "It's my cloak we need. One between the two of us, since I don't think I can keep you from coming." Neville snorted derisively; Harry ignored it. "And apparently he wants to show us something. Go figure."

Neville brightened considerably. "Maybe it's the first task? What if they were bringing something in? My dad said there was a huge fuss about importing some magical creatures. What might they be bringing?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, if we go by your presumption at the train, it would probably be dragons at some point. Because of Charlie, remember?"

Neville's eyes glazed for a long moment. Harry fought down some snickers; while Neville wasn't an avid fan of magical creatures, if you waved a dragon under his nose he'd sit up and follow like a puppy to sausage. Harry didn't know whether to sigh in irritation, or amusement. He definitely wasn't going alone now.

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"Holy," Neville breathed, falling flat onto his bed. He and Harry had just returned, and Harry tried vainly to hush him. Not surprisingly, it didn't work, and Harry settled back onto his bed with a wry grin. Neville laughed. "Dragons, Harry! We get to see them go up against dragons! I can't wait to see who gets the Horntail!"

Harry's grin wilted slightly. "It's going to be horrible; they could get hurt so bad ..."

"Harry." Neville sat up and eyed him carefully. "Harry, they know what could go wrong; there will be safeguards, from the dragon handlers themselves to Dumbledore and the other two heads. The teachers should be out there as well; the champions will be fine." Neville made a rough face and then sighed, lowering his voice to a low whisper. "Stop worrying about Prince. He'd probably scare the dragon just by glaring at it."

Harry jerked back and nearly slid off his bed before he regained his composure enough to laugh weakly. Alan probably would glare at the dragon, but that wouldn't really scare it. His laughter trailed off and Harry returned to eyeing Neville with concern. Neville's face was unreadable, and he quickly doused the light before Harry could look much longer, settling into his own bed. Harry waited a moment and then stepped over to put his hand on Neville's shoulder.

"Brother." He whispered. They hadn't used that endearment between them for ... Harry didn't think it had been used since before they'd

come to Hogwarts. That was too long. “Brother, I’ll be fine. I’m just worried for a friend, is all.”

Neville was silent for a long moment after, but as Harry lifted his hand to leave, Neville pulled it back down with his own. He didn’t look up, but Harry could see his mouth pull into a smile from the side. “I know ... brother. Go to bed already.”

||||

Alan was already in the library when Harry came in the next day, and he smiled warmly at him. “Harry, where did you get those bags under your eyes from?”

Harry looked up at him, and then away for a moment. Alan put his book up and leaned forward; this was unusual. About to ask, he closed his mouth and waited patiently. This was Harry’s turn.

“Alan ... Hagrid took ... Neville and I down to see something last night. It was the first task. It’s dragons.” Harry whispered.

Alan felt like his blood had frozen for a moment. He spoke past it, closing down on his feelings to keep working. “Dragons?” He knew he could handle this. He knew it. But his knees were still feeling a tad more watery than he’d like. He shook his head and looked back up at Harry. “What kind of dragons? Do you know?”

“Swedish Short Snout, Chinese Fireball, and a Hungarian Horntail.”

Alan closed his eyes and shook his head once more. This was more than he’d been expecting.

“I don’t think you have to fight them, or anything. Charlie, one of the handlers that came with them, commented that they were all nesting mothers.”

Alan looked up at Harry, and then gave him a small, thankful smile. He nodded shortly, and then gathered his books together. “I need to go talk to a few people. See you, Harry.” Alan paused at the shelves, and looked back at Harry with a wry smile. “Thank you.”

He turned and left, walking as quickly as he could and then breaking into a short run once outside the library, heading for his father's office. He slowed occasionally for a prefect or teacher, but kept up a quick pace as he made his way downstairs. He quickly opened the door to his father's rooms, stepped inside and froze.

"Hey, nephew." Geoffrey waved warmly from his seat near the fire across from Severus.

Alan stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind him before he swore under his breath and then gave Geoffrey a warm smile. Geoffrey turned once more, a little concerned since Alan didn't smile like that for just anything. "What's up, pup?"

"The first task is dragons. What do you remember of that fiasco with the jabberwocky which might help me get past it?" Alan quickly asked. He was rewarded as Geoffrey's jaw dropped while he turned an interesting shade of pink.

Severus looked between the two of them with interest and poured Geoffrey another drink, waving Alan into the next seat over.

"Alright, how do you know its dragons and what was this about a jabberwocky?"

Alan gave Severus a quick smile and tried to grab the glass he'd poured for Geoffrey. Geoffrey recovered in time to snatch it from his grasp and drain it before he'd gotten anywhere with it, and Alan frowned even as he answered his father.

"An informant told me, and the jabberwocky was a nuisance Geoffrey took care of in Georgia and managed to make a fiasco of, despite being successful. My wand core is from that jabberwocky. And now I need to get past a dragon, so I presume that something that could hold a jabberwocky should be effective for at least some time against a dragon."

Severus rubbed his nose and looked between them. "Which is larger, a jabberwocky or a dragon?"

"Dragon, easily." Geoffrey answered. "The fear in a jabberwocky isn't size or strength. It's just hideous, devious, and the largest carnivore in America. Not to mention it does have hallucinogenic poison and a voice fit to make a banshee throttle it in offence." Geoffrey shrugged. "But to subdue it, you could easily modify it to a dragon, I'm sure. What were you thinking of, Alan?"

Alan smiled at Geoffrey as Severus poured himself another drink with a faint shake of his head, and began to outline his plan.

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Monday came sooner than Harry expected. He hadn't seen Alan again Sunday, but he presumed Alan had spent the entire time going over his plan of attack. Harry was just waiting on his worry, staying awake all through History of Magic, staring out the window and hearing nothing of Professor Binns' lecture. He didn't doubt that Alan would be fine, but there was certainly some concern about just how 'fine' he would remain. He'd seen Alan tense as soon as he mentioned dragons, a ready sort of tense, that was just waiting for the blow to fall and the fight to begin.

Both Alan and Severus were absent from lunch, and Harry felt his stomach flip over as it was announced that the students were to follow their Head of House to the site of the First Task. Harry walked casually next to Ron and Neville; Neville apparently completely distracted talking to Hermione. Too distracted, in fact, to even look at Harry. Harry stifled the feeling of betrayal, and quickly engaged Ron in conversation as they made their way to the stands, and then into their sections in random order. Harry pulled from the conversation to move into the very front row, nearly ninety degrees removed from the judges' seats themselves. Neville hesitated, and then turned and stood directly beside Harry and bowed Hermione into her seat before taking his own. Ron was torn between sitting by Hermione or Harry, but quickly walked past them to take the seat opposite Neville on Harry's other side.

Harry smiled at Ron, tried to catch Neville's eye but was foiled by his quiet conference with Hermione and so Harry looked past them to the

judges' seats. They were sitting quietly, with two empty seats. Madam Maxine was on the edge closest to them, engaged in apparently warm conversation with Mr. Templar, who was apparently enjoying himself, watching Madam Maxine with occasional pleased glances around the stadium. Beside them were two more empty seats, and then Professor Karkaroff was leaning against the last chair with a sullen expression.

"Hey, you taken a good look at the arena?"

Harry turned back as Ron spoke, and then glanced down at the arena. Four dragon handlers were walking in holding a large bundle of dragon eggs on a blanket, laying it quickly down on a small raised dais angled out of the middle of the floor, closest to the wall by their section. Ron was eyeing the eggs with interest and Harry nodded.

"Yeah, I'm very glad I'm not down there."

Harry stifled the nervousness that stirred up. A second glance at the judges' table proved that Dumbledore had shown up and Ludo Bagman darted along shortly thereafter. Harry and most of the rest of the stands jumped as a stifled roar sounded, and the large blue-grey Swedish Short Snout was led out to her eggs, which she saw and hunkered down on immediately. At the top of the pile, was a small – in comparison to the others – golden egg. Harry looked at it, feeling fascinated, and jumped when Bagman spoke up.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the first task of the Triwizard Tournament!"

A/N: Yes, I'm a horrible evil person and no, I did not engineer this. I hope you enjoyed reading, and would love for you to read & review! The next chapter will go up once I return from my holiday, so probably on the sixth of Jan. Enjoy, and Merry/Happy Christmas, or whichever Holiday is yours.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Nineteen

Krum was first up, and Harry watched him come out to face the dragon with a thrill of awe. The highlight was a well-executed Conjunctivitis curse. The down side was the dragon crushed some of its real eggs and exercised the barriers keeping the dragon fire from the stands. Harry just about screamed when the flames fizzled not five feet in front of him. He and Neville were laughing about it for several minutes thereafter, as Krum darted out of the enclosure with the golden egg and waited for his points. The ten from Karkaroff got several boos and nasty comments, along with a rude suggestion from Ron. Krum finished with a total of 40.

Neville completely forgot about talking to Hermione when they brought out the Chinese Fireball, instead just staring at it as it lay protectively over its eggs. Harry contemplated poking him, but Hermione beat him to it. Neville yelped rewardingly, and started into another short, quiet argument with Hermione. Harry turned to comment to Ron, but stopped when he saw the conflicted look Ron was giving Neville. Harry paused, and then cursed silently. Ron still liked Hermione, apparently, despite his apparent lack of showing it, and, well, he was losing out to Neville now that Neville had decided to make his own move. The second whistle sounded, and Harry elbowed Ron, acting as though he hadn't noticed his preoccupation.

"Hey, it's Fleur's turn now. What do you think she'll do?"

Ron reluctantly looked down to where Fleur would come out, seeming loath to pull his eyes from Hermione. Once he looked at Fleur, though his attention was once more stolen by Fleur's strange charm.

Fleur tried a charm to put the dragon to sleep, which worked but unfortunately the dragon was coiled around its eggs, on top of which was the egg she needed. It was some pretty fancy footwork for her to get up there, and then the dragon snorted fire in its sleep. Finally, however, she plucked the egg up and went out of the enclosure, nursing a scalded hand and a sore ankle from slipping once.

The dragon was taken away, and Fleur was given her points, 34 total, her hand covered in orange paste. Harry watched as the Chinese

Fireball was gently roused and removed with its eggs, and the cement coloured eggs of the Horntail were brought out, followed by their mother. Harry swallowed; Alan was next.

The whistle sounded and Alan strode into the enclosure, looking as casual as if he were striding down the corridor. It was an easy sort of grace, and Harry saw him gently palming his wand. He stifled a laugh; despite Alan hardly doing any sort of motion, Harry strongly suspected he was trying several spells right then. As he stiffened slightly, Harry suspected they didn't work.

"What's he doing just standing there?" Ron griped. "You'd think he'd be getting to work already."

"He's probably trying something, or setting up a spell, Ron." Harry retorted. "Give him a little credit."

Harry's attention was so focused on the enclosure he completely missed the amused and confused glances exchanged among his friends behind his back.

A loud bang sounded from the enclosure and the dragon screamed. Harry covered his ears in pain, and watched as the creature leapt from her guard on her eggs straight towards Alan. Alan was running sidelong across the enclosure, his wand in hand. He stopped, the dragon behind him and nearly opposite her eggs, and then raised his wand. The incantation was lost in the dragon's frustrated noise, but a long grey-metal cable leapt from Alan's wand and shot across the distance. One end snapped against the enclosure wall; the second sealed to the ground and the rest folded over the dragon's neck, fusing on the far side and tethering the creature in place.

Alan had continued running straight for the eggs as soon as the spell had left his wand, glancing back only to check that it was in place. It was, but Harry could see as well as anyone that it wouldn't last long. Alan was nearly at the clutch when a loud, sharp twang announced the cable breaking, and then vanishing altogether before it could whip about and possibly do damage. Alan didn't waste time where he was. He didn't grab at the egg at all; he stopped, and awkwardly roundhouse-kicked it off the top of the clutch, before dropping low

and casting a shield as a burst of fire broke over his head. The dragon had paused to breathe its fire, and when the flames finished, Alan was no longer there. The crowd gasped as one, and then there was a sharp whistle that drew all eyes to the left, where the egg had rolled. Harry looked quickly and then laughed. Alan was calmly leaning against the entrance to the enclosure, the egg under his arm and a smug grin on his face. It was the grin that sent Harry into a fit of laughter; he knew how often Alan practiced that one, which he did on purpose to make someone just want to beat his smug face in just so he'd stop looking superior. Beside him, the grin was working perfectly on Ron.

"The git! He just about gets barbequed and he's acting like it's all a bloody joke! How the hell did he do that, anyways?"

Harry couldn't answer he was laughing so hard. He didn't have a clue how Alan had done it, but he was pretty certain he'd be able to get it out of him later on. He was just as sure that Alan wouldn't tell anyone else, and had done it completely on purpose, just for the showmanship. Harry blamed it on his being raised American.

The Horntail was shortly subdued, and Alan was joined by Severus to wait for the scores to come up. He was still leaning against the entrance, and Harry began to have a nagging suspicion that Alan hadn't come out as well as he was playing it out to be. Harry had to give him credit for it, at least. He watched intently as each judge gave a number.

Madam Maxine went first, and shot an eight out. Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. Mr. Templar gave a nine. Dumbledore marked him at a ten, leading Harry to have to stifle a grin, and Mr. Bagman also gave a ten. Karkaroff, a foul expression on his face, gave a five, totalling 42. Beside Harry, Neville hissed.

"Asswipe. Gave Krum a ten, and managed to mark Prince down to a five. What sort of bloody ninny-hammer ..." Neville's mutterings faded into inaudible mutterings which was probably good for the sake of his shoulder since Harry doubted Hermione would like Neville's insulting creativity.

Harry, however just watched Alan nod in acceptance of the ruling, and then leave with his father. Harry sighed, feeling a large weight lift off his shoulders, and followed the others as the students dispersed from the stands to head back to the school. Harry felt there would be some sort of a party in the common room for this: Hogwarts was currently in the lead, Slytherin champion or not.

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Harry was correct; there was a party in the tower. Mostly it was because Fred and George took it upon themselves to fetch food from the kitchens in order to create a party. Halfway through, an ulterior motive became clear when Neville ate a custard cream and burst into feather. Harry thought he was seeing things when his best friend became a large yellow feather duster, but Fred and George immediately laughed.

“Canary Creams!” Fred announced to the room at large, indicating the silently steaming yellow ball of feathers that had previously been Neville. “George and I invented them! Seven sickles each, a bargain!”

The room burst into laughter, and soon thereafter Neville moulted and suspiciously eyed the two custards he had left, and then turned a look on the twins Harry watched with enjoyment. Neville picked the two up and approached the twins, who were already getting a few requests as others turned into canaries as well. Hermione watched with distrust, but that became interest when Neville loudly asked the twins,

“Hey, Fred, George. Do you have to eat these for them to work, or could you get hexed just by getting it on your skin?”

Fred frowned a moment, and looked to George. George shrugged in turn. “Not sure, Neville.”

Neville gave them a sweet smile. “Well, you tell me.” Neville lifted each hand, in which the two custards were cradled, and them tossed them into Fred and George’s faces before ducking and returning to his seat, laughing. Harry laughed quietly and then quickly gave Neville a high five. Fred and George took the retaliation with grace and cleaned each other up, before they shouted back to Neville,

"Apparently it doesn't work. Good try though."

Neville nodded. "Thank you." He chirped.

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Harry managed to run into Alan that Thursday in the library. He was sitting in the library, surrounded by books once more. A glance proved them to be language oriented, and Harry eyed them before taking his usual seat. He pulled out his own books distractedly, and then looked up. Alan was eyeing him warily.

"So." Harry began. "What the heck did you do?"

"Tried several charms, enraged it, tied it up, ran over, kicked the egg, crouched, shielded, and disillusioned myself to edge away without it tracking me and then only opening it once I was over at the wall with the egg."

Harry stared a moment, and then huffed. "You make it sound so easy." He griped. He knew it probably wasn't, but with how he'd phrased it ...

"You ever conjured steel?" Alan shot. "It's horribly complicated to make it actually strong enough. And then you have to find a way to anchor it so it'll stick. That's not cool."

"Hey, I said phrased, Alan. Don't get in a knot about it."

Alan flushed. "Sorry. I'm still a tad sore."

"Sore? You didn't look injured." Harry fished. He'd thought Alan might've hurt himself ...

"Kicked the egg wrong, so my ankle's sore. It's nothing, really, but hurts enough to leave me snappish and I don't dare get it healed by Pomfrey. I like my score, thanks. And sprains are a pain in the ass to fix."

Harry fought down his laughter. Alan would keep quiet to hold his reputation. "Alright, but you're sure no one you know can heal it? Why not get Geoffrey to do it?"

Alan shuddered and gave Harry a stare that told him he was nuts. "Geoffrey?" He looked at Harry for a moment, and snorted. "Right, you remember what happened with that jabberwocky, Harry. No thanks."

Harry snorted and laughed. "Fine, no Geoffrey. Snape might know something."

Alan paused, and then sighed. "Alright, fine, I'll get someone to heal it."

"Good." Harry nodded in satisfaction and turned back to his book. Alan rolled his eyes, and subtly hexed Harry's book. The letter blurred for a moment, and a large smiley face leered out of the pages at Harry and then stuck out its tongue before disappearing. Harry jerked, watched it, and then glared at Alan. Alan wasn't looking, and Harry just shook his head, and turned back to reading. He had earned that. He still sent a hex back Alan's way and hummed as he read. Alan would hex him the moment he shifted his feet and discovered his shoelaces braided together.

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"Potter! Weasley! Will you pay attention?"

Harry jumped and quickly placed the rubber haddock that had previously been a fake wand on his desk quickly and sat at attention for Professor McGonagall. Ron stifled a guilty laugh and did the same with his tin parrot, mimicking Harry's attentive pose. Hermione and Neville, seated together once more on the side of Harry opposite Ron, rolled their eyes as one and kept their attention dutifully on McGonagall as it had been all class.

It was the end of the class; they'd changed their guinea fowl into guinea pigs, and were now spending the time until the bell rang playing with a few more of Fred and George's creations, which

Neville had not joined in due to his conversation with Hermione. Apparently, however, McGonagall had something to add and so Harry returned his attention to her with a proper apologetic air. She didn't seem impressed.

"Now that I have your full and proper attention," She said with a firm look their way. "I have something to say to you all."

"The Yule Ball is approaching, a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth-years and above, although you may invite a younger student if you wish."

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle; Parvati elbowed her as she worked furiously not to join in. Hermione hissed something next to Neville and Neville gave a stifled snort. However, Harry's amusement fell as they both looked his way. Professor McGonagall ignored them; Harry supposed she knew saying anything would only encourage them.

"Dress robes will be worn," Ron groaned, "and the Ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then," McGonagall gave the class a hard look, "The Yule Ball is a chance for us all to ... er, let our hair down." She continued in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, and Harry pressed his lips together tightly. He could see why she was laughing now: Professor McGonagall, with her hair pulled into a severe bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does not mean," Professor McGonagall ignored the amusement of the class of teenagers with ease, "that we will be relaxing the standards of behaviour we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and Harry and his friends left in the bustle of activity. Neville, curiously, lost his place by Hermione's side as they left the door and came up on Ron's other side, putting Harry next to her

instead. Harry didn't care much at the moment, he was now too concerned about the main issue that came to mind: Who to ask to the Ball. He couldn't think of anyone other than Hermione that he might like spending time with, and he wasn't going to ask her: no matter Neville's sudden abandonment of her at the moment, which could have been accidental although Harry doubted it was, Neville was very clearly interested in her and Harry wasn't going to get in his way. Now, if Neville didn't ask her, Harry couldn't think of another Gryffindor he'd rather ask ...

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Christmas break had never been so crowded before. Harry was sure absolutely everyone was going to be signing on; he was almost surprised when Nanna informed him she was going to be going home for the break, as was Melanie. Ginny, however, refused their invitations to come over, and Harry and Ron overheard it.

"I'm going to stay here, Melanie, Nanna. I got asked to the ball, so I'm going."

Ron choked, and spun in place. Both Fred and George, behind them, turned to her immediately.

"Ginny! Who asked you?" George demanded. Melanie echoed him, but Ginny just raised her nose to them.

"A boy." She answered curtly. "A sweet boy. Melanie, Nanna, come up to my dorm and I'll tell you all about it."

The Weasley boys could only watch in shock as she left, and Harry stifled an amused snort. His desire to laugh faded as Ron's stomach grumbled and Harry just smirked.

"Hungry, Ron?"

Ron looked down at himself and huffed. "Yes. They serve lunch about now, Saturdays, right?"

Harry decided to not remind him that it had been the same for four years, and merely nodded, getting up and leading the way to the Great Hall, where there were already fairly large crowds, including a lot of packs of girls. Immediately upon entering, Harry noticed Alan sitting in place, by all appearances staring blankly at the ceiling. Harry purposefully didn't laugh, but it was a close thing. Ron lead the way to seats on the Gryffindor table, and dug into the meal, but Harry once more eyed Alan. He was surprised, then, when Alan looked over at Blaise, scanned the hall, and then stood, walking around the end of the Slytherin table and approaching the Ravenclaw one. Partway along, he stopped, and, speaking overtly formally at a normal volume in a now silent hall, was heard by everyone.

"Ms. Lovegood, would you go to the Yule Ball with me?"

Harry felt like choking. Alan was asking Loony- Luna Lovegood to the Yule Ball?

"Why thank you Alan, but I don't really know how to dance." Luna answered, sounding like she barely knew where she was or what Alan might have been doing asking her. Harry wasn't even sure she remembered there was to be a Ball at all.

"I'd be honoured to help you learn, if you like." Alan offered gently. Harry hadn't heard him sound that sweet since he'd talked to Hermione on the train first year. It was a fake-sounding earnestness that Harry could see being used on a nervous horse. Luna either didn't notice, or didn't care.

"Thank you, Mr. Prince, I accept."

Alan bent, and apparently kissed Luna's hand before he returned to the Slytherin table and turned down it to stick his tongue out at the group of girl's farther down. Harry fought down laughter, and Ron, beside him, shook his head slowly.

"He's taking Loony Lovegood to the ball?"

Harry shrugged, chuckling slightly. "Apparently he didn't feel like getting hounded with dance invitations. Luna would be a pretty safe

girl to take; she's not going to start insisting that they're in some real relationship, now is she?"

Ron shuddered. "If she did, that would be damn scary."

Harry shuddered at the thought. "While, that's his problem, then. Who are you going to take to the Ball?"

Ron shrugged with determined casualness. "Can't think of anyone, really."

"You know, it doesn't have to be a Gryffindor. You could ask Hannah Abbot, or something. Padma Patil, maybe."

Ron looked considering, and then he shot Harry a strange quiet look. "Is Neville going to ask Hermione to the ball?"

"He hasn't yet." Harry returned, looking blankly at the other tables, determinedly keeping his face quiet. "I think he intends to, although he really should move a little quicker."

Ron nodded slowly. "Yeah, but I think I'll leave him to it. You think Hannah's got a date? She's not that bad a girl ..."

Harry turned to give Ron a wry grin. "Well, she's sitting right over there. You a Gryffindor or not? You don't have to ask her too loudly, really."

Ron paled and swallowed his mouthful of food, before he squared his shoulders and then quailed. "Maybe once I'm done eating ..." He murmured.

Harry determinedly shrugged casually. "Well, she might be asked before then by someone with more courage."

Ron glared at Harry, swallowed his mouthful once more, and shook his head. "Slythindor." He muttered.

Harry just inclined his head, and rested his elbow on the table as Ron stood and walked around the table to reach the Hufflepuff one. He

hesitated, squared his shoulders, shot Harry a dirty look and then walked cautiously up to where Hannah was sitting with her friends. They all stopped talking as Ron approached, although the Hall was still fairly loud, and Harry could only tell that Ron was asking her because he turned the famous Weasley red, and then nodded his head quickly with a wide grin. He turned and walked back with a spring in his step, and Harry saw the Hufflepuff girls break into a fit of tittering laughter. Once Ron was back, he beamed at Harry.

“She said yes! I’ve got a date, Harry, she said yes!”

Harry laughed. “Told you you could do it. It wasn’t that hard, was it?”

“No … but now you have to go ask someone.” Ron shot. Harry choked on his drink and flushed.

“No, Ron. I can’t think of anyone to ask.” Harry could actually, but the first to come to mind was Hermione, and she was taken. The second he wouldn’t even dream of asking anytime in this life, and there was no third.

“Sure you can.” Ron offered. “You could always ask Padma, you know.” He shot with a smile.

Harry shook his head. “Only person that comes to mind is Hermione, remember?” It was a small lie, but Ron would buy it. Unfortunately, it didn’t shut him up.

“Well, fine.” Ron shrugged, returning to his meal. He waved his fork Harry’s way as he continued. “You’d better not go dateless to the Ball, though. If I have to put up with my dress robes …” Ron shook his head, and Harry smiled.

“Well, my mom said your mother was looking at maroon ones in a second-hand shop before they dragged her off to look at nicer ones. They’d even had lace.”

Ron looked horrified, and then slightly flushed. Leaving his food, which was pretty much done anyways, he stood and grabbed Harry by the throat of his robes, dragging him out of the hall, and only

pausing to return Hannah's wave from the Hufflepuff table. He dragged him clear up to the dorms and then shuffled through his trunk. Finally, he pulled out his own dress robes with an irritable flourish. Neville poked his head out of his curtains and whistled lowly.

"Those are nice robes, Ron."

The robes Ron held were a deep brown, with Celtic knot work along the hems in golden thread. They weren't extravagant, but the gold did look somewhat gaudy with the simple fabric. However, Harry could see they'd look very nice on Ron, although the high collar was a little strange. Harry just shrugged to Ron's indignation, and smiled faintly.

"I think they're fine. They could've been maroon, you know, with lace."

Ron shuddered and made to toss the robes into his trunk but paused and folded them instead. Harry supposed he wasn't used to new robes, which those were even if they weren't even a quarter as expensive as his and Neville's were.

"I'll take your word for it, but still. I don't like them."

"I'm sure Hannah will like them." Harry offered. Neville perked in his bed.

"Hannah?" He inquired.

Ron straightened and beamed at Neville. "I actually asked her. In the Great Hall, just now. She said yes, too. I'm gonna go tell Dean and Seamus okay?" Ron darted out without waiting for an answer. Neville watched him go with a strange little smirk, and then looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow.

"Herbology?" He asked.

Harry snorted and nodded. "When he wasn't staring at Hermione, he was staring at her. Besides, Alan had just asked Luna to the ball in the middle of lunch, so I could play on his courage to get him to go."

Neville snorted and studied his fingernails. "Well, yes, that would make things very easy if you played off the courage of a Slytherin in front of him. Despite that I doubt that was courage on Alan's part and more calculation ..."

Harry sank into his own bed and smiled. "Oh, doubtless. But you still haven't asked Hermione."

Neville flushed and gave Harry an awkward smile. "And do you have anyone in mind?" He shot.

The effect was perfect; Harry stopped bugging him to flush on his own. Lying to Neville and saying that Hermione was the only person he could think of asking wouldn't work, but he sure as Hell wasn't going to say that. Harry still shrugged, and looked aside, answering under his breath. "Yeah, but not in this lifetime."

Neville still heard. "You're not going to ask her?"

Harry gave Neville a hard look. "I can't. I'd be lynched, and if I weren't, she would. If she even accepted at all."

Neville watched Harry for a long moment, and tapped his finger against his lip. "So ... she'd be Slytherin." Harry flinched, which was answer enough. "Harry ... are you so certain –"

"I'm not testing it, Neville, so don't even try it. I'll find someone else to take, if I have to ask Parvati or Lavender."

Neville shrugged with a carefully blank face and ducked back into his curtains, shutting himself off. Angry and upset, Harry ducked behind his own and hauled out his homework, something that would keep him out of sight for a good while.

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A few days later, term was drawing to a close, and Harry still hadn't asked anyone. Surprisingly, Neville hadn't asked Hermione either, and Harry told him flat-out Thursday after Defence that if he didn't ask

Hermione, not only would she be taken, but Harry would set him up with Parvati. Neville snorted, and glared at him for a long moment.

“If I ask Hermione at dinner, will you ask Susan Bones to the dance as well?”

“At dinner?” Harry gaped. “In front of everybody?”

“Well, if you think you can catch her afterwards, then by all means, but if you don’t, then I’m setting you up with Parvati.”

Harry gaped, and then laughed faintly. Neither he nor Neville liked the Patil twins all that much, and Parvati they liked even less than Padma. After all the activities they’d had to go through for purebloods where they’d seen them, they just didn’t hold a grand opinion of them.

“Deal, Neville. You ask first.”

When dinner came, Neville held up his end admirably. They’d just sat, plates barely full, and Neville spoke up.

“Hermione?” He waited until she glanced up, and Harry saw him colour slightly. “Would you go to the Ball with me?”

Hermione quickly covered her mouth and swallowed, and then her face fell. “Oh, Neville. I’m sorry; I’m already going with someone else.”

Harry thought that Neville hid his expression very well, and very quickly. Rather than looking as devastated as Harry imagined he truly was, Neville just swallowed lightly and looked down at his plate, answering without looking at her.

“Oh, well. Sorry.”

“It’s alright, Neville.” Hermione returned. A glance at her face made Harry look again just to be sure. She looked gravely disappointed. “I’d love to have a dance with you while we’re there, though, Neville. I’m sure my date won’t mind.”

"Really?" Neville glanced up. "That would be lovely, Hermione. Can I ask who you're going with?"

Hermione's face quirked slightly. "I'd like to keep it secret until then, actually. I'm sure you'll be surprised."

Harry smirked faintly as Neville smiled wryly, and then Harry added his thoughts. "Hermione, with that tone of voice I'd guess you'd accepted to go with Prince if I didn't know he'd already asked Luna."

Hermione made a point of turning her attention back to her plate, and Harry shared a confused look with Neville and shrugged. He decided to ask Neville about his second choice later on, and not at the table with Hermione. You just don't do that.

It wasn't long before dinner ended, and Harry left quickly, checking the Hufflepuff table for Susan before he stopped and waited by the door. It wasn't too long before she came out, and Harry was surprised that Neville had waited nearby. Quickly, Harry stepped forward as Susan passed, and smiled weakly.

"Susan? Could I have a moment?"

The girls around her burst into giggles, and Harry frowned at them, but Susan coloured faintly, and stepped out of the main thoroughfare to stand by him. "Yes, Harry?"

"Do you have a date to the Ball?" Susan shook her head slowly, a small smile on her face. "Would you like to go with me?" Harry finished quickly, and then he hastened to add. "Just friends, you know. I'd like your company."

Susan nodded carefully. "Sure Harry, I'd love to go with you just as friends." She smiled with what Harry thought was relief, and Harry suspected that she, like him, must have somebody else that really caught her eye that she just wasn't willing to ask or was taken.

"Great. I'll meet you by the Hufflepuff common room, then?"

"You know where it is?" Susan asked, surprised.

Harry grinned. "I know where all the common rooms are. Would you rather just meet here?"

She shook her head slowly, and then grinned. "No, meet me at the Hufflepuff entrance. I'll be waiting, okay?"

Harry nodded, and, impulsively, he gently bowed over her hand and kissed it before leaving. He was surprised to find that Neville wasn't waiting for him, but had instead approached a group of Ravenclaws and was talking to them. They giggled, and tittered, and finally Neville stepped away and came over to Harry, wearing a strained expression. At Harry's inquiring look, he just shrugged.

"Asked Padma. I won't feel bad about being distracted while I'm with her."

Harry watched him carefully, and then looked straight ahead. "You really like Hermione." He stated.

Neville shrugged, and didn't answer, picking up his pace and leading the way to the Gryffindor dorms. Harry didn't press.

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The week ended easily. Ron groaned and fussed about the test in Potions, but otherwise everything was fine. The decorations were extravagant, and all the people were happy and boisterous. The only problem that stood out at that point was when Draco came by them one evening. He glanced around at them, and then sneered.

"Do any of you have a date at all? I don't suppose you could find anyone with that low of taste, though ..."

Harry just shrugged. "Now, is Pansy going with you because she wants to, or is it only because you're already engaged?"

Draco flushed dull pink, and Pansy hissed, "I don't suppose you actually have a date, Potter, do you? Or did you manage to catch a ride with the toothy mudblood?"

Harry didn't bother hexing her; Alan already had his wand out, and Pansy yelped as her robes turned brilliant yellow. Hermione smiled pleasantly as they looked around in surprise, not noticing Alan strolling casually by, and she took her own initiative.

"Yellow's a lovely colour for you Pansy. A warning sign and a wonderful look for you. And really Draco, just because you only have a date because your parents set it up, doesn't mean other people of quality can't ask someone for themselves." She turned and grabbed Neville and Harry's arms. "Come with me, my good men. Ronald, please."

Harry felt he deserved an award for keeping his face straight as they strode into the Great Hall. Across from him, he was shocked Neville wasn't flushing either. Ron was more than happy to bow them inside and then trail across to the Gryffindor table. Neville helped Hermione into her seat, and then sat beside her for a few moments before he succumbed to snickers. Within moments, the rest of them had joined him, exchanging high-fives and grins. That had been wonderful.

As they laughed, Harry got a good look at Hermione and paused, hoping Ron would notice and ask. He didn't, so Harry finally decided to make a simple comment,

"Madam Pomfrey did a good job restoring your teeth, you know."

Hermione's chuckles subsided and she smiled brightly at Harry. "She did, didn't she?"

"A very good restoration." Harry nodded. "They're perfect."

Hermione smiled again, and Harry could see the difference. It was very pleasing, when before her teeth had been a little too big. "I know," was all Hermione added.

Satisfied with the answer, Harry shrugged and returned to his meal.

Christmas came almost sooner than Harry had expected, with the snow and decorations up and about, with the Durmstrang ship looking like it had been covered in frosting while the Beauxbatons carriage was an iced pumpkin out in the snow. In his own cozy dorm, Harry woke Christmas morning feeling vaguely nostalgic. The only other time he'd spent Christmas at Hogwarts had been second year, when he'd been terrified that discovering he was a Parselmouth would make his father hate him. Now, he was staying in order to attend the Yule Ball, a much happier reason but one that left him feeling just as homesick. Fortunately, he had the usual large pile of presents to go through, and the first package he found was from 'the Marauders'. It made him nervous that they had all signed it together. However, it was addressed to both him and Neville, so Harry set it aside and then pitched a shoe through Neville's curtains. A yelp sounded, and then Neville shoved his ragged head out with a fierce glare.

"Harry, what the Hell was that for!"

"Neville, it's Christmas." Harry said exasperatedly. "And I've got a present from the Marauders addressed to both of us, so if you want to see it ..."

Neville's eyes widened and he tore open the bed curtains to stand by Harry's bed. Harry lifted the package, they each got a grip on the paper with one hand and balanced the box with the others and then tore the paper off. Neville stuck his tongue out and Harry groaned when it showed nothing more than a plain brown box. Harry settled it in his lap and pulled it open. Inside was a large, folded sheet of parchment sitting atop a thick book, and a letter. Harry pulled the letter out, handing the blank parchment and the book to Neville and ditching the box, before he opened the letter.

To Neville and Harry,

We, the Marauders four, gift you, our heirs, with two items, and a charge.

You are to both follow the instructions of the new tome you now possess, and, with the parchment we bequeath you, must use it for its true and noble purpose and your own ends.

'We solemnly swear we are up to no good'

The Marauders;

Moony, Brownclaw, Padfoot, and Prongs

Neville stared at Harry, and then shifted the paper off the book. He let out a burst of laughter, and grinned brightly.

"The Auror's Guide to Animal Camouflage'! Harry, I can't believe they gave this to us! Of all things ... it's not legal if you're not an auror!"

Harry pulled the parchment from Neville, commenting distractedly, as he couldn't believe they'd done it, "I'm not surprised in the least. What surprises me, is this." Harry tapped the parchment with his wand, and murmured, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Black ink lines crossed the parchment, and Harry smiled incredulously as it carved out a detailed cover on the page facing him. The words that arced across the top made him smile,

Messrs Moony, Brownclaw, Padfoot, and Prongs

(With the lovely aid of the significant ladies)

Purveyors of aid to Magical Mischief-Makers

Are proud to present,

THE MARAUDERS MAP

Version Two

Neville shook his head slowly. "I can't believe it. They remade it? When they knew that Fred and George had the original?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably got a few new ideas, and got tired of seeing Wormtail on it. Fascinating, this ..." Harry opened the parchment up and glanced over it cautiously. "This is really nice, look."

The writing was crisp, neat, and precise. The dots had been altered to little footsteps, and the entirety of Hogwarts was clear and detailed. Apparently the help of Lily and Alice had made a few things clearer, which meant that the layout of the girl's dorms was now exact, putting them all in view. Harry took a moment to flip to the view of the Slytherin dorms and was unsurprised that the same was true there as well. He also wasn't surprised that Alan was not in his dorm.

"Prince isn't in his dorm, huh. Can't find Severus Snape either." Harry observed to Neville. Neville looked over just in time to see the map rustle, and suddenly a section of the map flared red. Harry looked over, and found himself staring at a room down the hall from Snape's office. Within were two dots, reading 'Alan Prince' and 'Severus Snape'

Neville whistled lowly. "Now that is handy. Does this show the grounds, too?"

Harry flipped another page, and showed Neville before shutting the parchment, and tapping his wand once more, "Mischief managed."

The parchment cleared and Neville grinned at Harry. "Our dads just told us to become animagi, and gave us a new and improved Marauders' Map. This is amazing."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Neville, really. Go back to your own presents. Not all Gryffindors are obsessed with pranks."

"You're not Gryffindor." Neville returned. "Anyways, can I see you open mine to you first?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Accio, Neville's gift to me." A small brown package came flying out, nearly upsetting the pile, and Harry quickly picked it up with a smile. Neville smiled nervously back, as Harry pulled the paper open. Inside it was a small box, which, once

Harry opened it, proved to contain a small clock that could be set on a nightstand. However, it wasn't a normal clock. It had several hands spaced around the edges, and upon them were names. 'James Potter' 'Lily Potter' 'Neville Longbottom' 'Nanna Potter' 'Sirius Black' and 'Remus Lupin' were there, alongside his own. Around the edges of the clock were not numbers, but the names of locations. Harry had seen a clock like this before, one that was much larger with more names. It belonged to Molly Weasley, and had her entire family on it. Currently, this one wasn't on so the names were merely spread out, but Harry couldn't wait to have it up and running, although he really wanted to add another name to it ...

"I can turn it on for you." Neville quickly offered. "And you can add more names. I wasn't sure whom all you wanted, but I was confident in those. I don't know if there's a limit to the number you can have or not ... if there was, I'd guess it to be ten or twelve. I think my parents are getting me my own, but I'd have to go find the gift. I hope you like it."

Harry touched the clock face gently and turned to give Neville a bright smile. "I love it, Neville. I can't think of anything better."

Neville beamed back at him, and Harry shrugged. "Now my gift to you feels tawdry."

Neville just laughed. "Don't bother feeling bad; that was my second idea. The first was to get you a Quidditch hat, but when my parents went in there to check out the clocks -they want one for our house-the idea just jumped me. Once you know the next name you want on, I can show you how to do it."

Harry paused and eyed the hands, nodding slowly. If he did add Alan, though, he didn't want his name blatantly on there. But the other boys had finally woken and, although they were admirably ignoring Harry and Neville's camaraderie, Harry didn't want to bring that up around them. Neville quickly returned to his own bed, and Harry returned to his presents, of which there were still quite a few. Hermione had gotten him a book on Potions; Ron, a bag of dungbombs. Hagrid had sent sweets; Remus, chocolate, and Sirius had given him a penknife that could open any lock and untie any knot. Harry wondered just how

much trouble his family wanted him to get into at school. His parents had split on his Christmas gifts this year, and Harry had received a warm, gorgeous navy blue wool cloak from Lily with a platinum serpent clasp coiled into the infinity symbol, carved with great detail down to every scale and shining golden eyes. His father had given Harry a set of Quidditch pads and a golden snitch. Trust his parents to go two different ways on the gifts. Nanna had given him a set of knitted gloves with runes worked onto them, something she must have gotten their mother to help with, but Harry was confident they would keep his hands warm, even if they were a very loud combination of brilliant scarlet and forest green. What was it with his sister and going for a combination of green and red for him? Maybe it was just the Christmas thing ...

III

Lunch was filling, delightful, and nearly too heavy, and the snow outside was welcome with a warm, full belly. It was surprising to all of them when Hermione left at five o'clock, even more surprising when it appeared all of the girls had done the same. Harry and Neville just shrugged and continued the snowball fight until it was an hour to and then trekked up to the dorms to get changed themselves.

It was a moment Harry didn't want to talk about afterwards, putting on the fine dress robes that were two years old already and hadn't been worn, that had been purchased with this year in mind. Putting them on, they fit perfectly, probably due to a charm to allow for minor adjustments in order to fit. Looking into the mirror he just remained silent looking over the different parts of the outfit, from the dark brown trim and the stripes only barely visible on the sides from the front, to the faint green embroidery crawling around his wrists, up his forearms to the edges of his collar and throat. Harry hesitated a moment before he slipped on his serpent necklace and then smiled into the mirror. The meaning behind the gifts would have made him feel overdressed for any other occasion. Turning, he looked back into the room at his friends.

Ron's dark brown robes made his hair look vibrant and strong rather than like it was at war with the clothes. The high collar emphasized his height, something that frustrated Harry to no end, and the gold

details made him look majestic. The thought that came to mind immediately was simply 'Gryffindor'. Beside him, Neville was just as impressive in his burgundy robes with their gold details. The cat on his shoulder glinted in the light, and the fabric had a soft majesty all of its own. Neville had apparently spent some time on his hair, and the colour seemed to gleam all on its own. Harry wondered how on earth he'd managed that. Harry hadn't even bothered to do more than brush and then run his fingers through it so that the mess at least looked purposeful rather than accidental.

Neville glanced over at him and smirked. "Gee, everyone's favourite ... Gryffindor."

Harry glared at Neville for the hesitation. "Nice to see you too, Nev." Neville shuddered, and waved his hand in apology. He hated that nickname as much as Harry hated 'Prongslet'. "Ron, you ready? We can go pick up our dates together, that way, and Neville can trail us until he's got to split off for Ravenclaw."

Neville cut in, "I agreed to meet Padma in the entrance hall. I'll just see you down there. Sure you don't want to wait and stare at the girls as they come down?"

Harry shook his head, and then nodded to Dean and Seamus, still getting into their own outfits, before leading the way out of the dorm, Ron following reluctantly.

The common room was packed full of students and it seemed to be a sea of colour with everyone out of the generic black robes. Ginny came down shortly after they'd entered, and squealed happily as she saw the three of them pass. Harry was surprised to see her dressed up in the very nice looking cream dress robes with a simple, thick border only a shade darker than the robes themselves. Harry smiled and nodded at her, and she quickly joined them at the door.

"It's good to see you; you look gorgeous, Harry!" She blushed as soon as she said it, but forced herself to keep walking. Harry blushed as well, but managed to keep himself under control.

"Thank you, Ginny. Your robes are beautiful as well. Who's your date?" Harry asked casually. Ron had tried to get it out of her and Hermione many times before, but both had avoided the question. This time, however, Ginny was off balance. She flushed, and giggled weakly, before leaning closer to whisper.

"Prince talked Blaise Zabini into asking me. I said yes," She fell back onto her feet and laughed faintly again, speaking normally, "and I'm meeting him in the entrance hall. I was so shocked, it's simply amazing."

Harry hid his surprise well, but gave her an honest smile. "I'm glad you got asked. I hope you enjoy it. You continue on with Neville, okay? I'm going to take Ron down a secret passage to the Hufflepuff commons for our dates."

Ginny laughed nervously again and waved them off. "Go right ahead, Harry! I'll see you there."

Harry heard Neville laugh gently as well, and then they were behind a tapestry and on their way down several flights of stairs, coming out just beyond the Hufflepuff common room towards the kitchen portrait Harry had led Ron through last year. It was only a corner ahead, and they were at the doorway to the Hufflepuff commons. Harry and Ron stood on the side closest to the entrance hall, and waited. They didn't have long as a younger student poked their heads out, saw them and yelled,

"Hannah! Susan! Your dates are here!"

Harry saw Ron swallow nervously and was grateful he was able to avoid the same. When the two girls came out, Harry smiled at them, and then stepped forward, marvelling at just how much hair Susan's braid had managed to hide. It cascaded down her back from a tie at her shoulder blades to the point he was sure she'd end up sitting on it during the meal. Once he got his attention back to her robes, he smiled appreciatively.

"Your clothes are gorgeous, Susan.

She blushed gently and fingered the tan material self-consciously. "Yours cost more than mine did."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not talking money, I'm talking about how it compliments you and your hair, which looks very nice itself, by the way."

Susan finally stopped blushing and slapped his shoulder. "Stop tossing the compliments about like that, or I'll think you're buttering me up to be more than a friend."

Harry innocently raised his eyebrows, and gently plucked at the pale green shawl. "Me? Flattery? Ron, Susan accused me of flattery."

Ron took a moment to pull his gaze from Hannah's own dress robes and shawl that showed curves Harry had never known she'd had. Apparently Ron hadn't known either, but when he did he looked Susan over and whistled. "It's not flattery if he tells you you're gorgeous Susan, although you're not going to hold half the attention Hannah does." Ron quickly turned back to his own date and, shaking his head, bowed and offered her his arm.

Harry did the same for Susan and winked at her as they straightened before leading her down the hall and whispering amusedly in her ear, which was only barely below him. "Well, he's got good recovery, there."

Susan laughed, and Harry smiled appreciatively at the picture she made. He did manage to get a very good-looking date.

It wasn't far from the Hufflepuff common room to the entrance hall, and when they arrived it was packed. However, it was fairly easy to find Neville because Harry had always had a sixth sense about that. He also had brought his wand with him and used a discrete Point Me charm. He found him next to Padma Patil, who was dressed very nicely in turquoise and who was looking Neville over in what Harry thought was very unflattering satisfaction. Next to her, her sister Parvati was standing, dressed in pink and looking unhappy with her own partner, Zacharias Smith. Neville greeted Harry's appearance with a strained smile.

"Hey, you got your dates. Hannah, Susan. You look very nice today."

Hannah blushed lightly, and Susan laughed. "Not as nice as you and Harry. You two are absolutely gorgeous. Those robes are simply lovely."

Neville blushed a fetching shade of pink, and began to respond with his thoughts on what Susan looked like, when nearby, another girl snorted. "I can't believe she actually wore that –that, whatever it is."

Those that heard looked around and Harry found himself biting his lip to keep his amusement and dismay under control. Luna had just come down from the Ravenclaw dorms, and she was wearing what appeared to be a see-through, silvery robe with a muggle-style, long skirted cocktail dress in an absolute rainbow of colours. The closest thing Harry had seen to that combination was rainbow sherbet. The robe made the colours muted and silver-toned, but it didn't erase the butterbeer cap necklace or the crab apples in one ear and the strawberry dangling from the other. Her hair, fortunately, was loose but clean and brushed and she walked down the stairs with a confidence none of the other girls had matched.

"Wow." Harry managed. "Colourful, that." Beside him, Susan gave a nervous giggle just before McGonagall spoke over the crowd.

"Champions, please come over here."

Harry saw the crowd part to allow Luna to stride over, and once she was there, Harry had a glimpse of black hair against black clothes before the view closed once more. There was a bit more shuffling, and then the doors to the Great Hall were opened.

A/N: ducks and hides Again! So Sorry! Did Not Conspire! See, it's up on time! Two weeks, I promise, although if I get lots of people bugging me I promise to do it sooner. Ten reviews, say? Think you could manage that? I love you all, I promise! Updated the day I got back! Thank you all so much for the reviews, I felt very loved and appreciated from every single one of you! And seriously, I'm halfway through fifth year - over thirty chapters. You'll have them coming every two weeks for a long time.

Another short reminder: This fic will have a raised rating come the end of fourth year, and it will play to that rating. I'm sorry to leave it low, and if any of you will not abide it, I'm sorry to lose you. If you stay on, Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the story. I haven't raised it yet as it feel ridiculous to me to rate for something that isn't going to be posted for months, something twenty chapters in that's not even there yet. Sorry if you don't like it.

And I'm sending another big hug and thank you to all the people who reviewed! It really makes me love posting the insanity I write.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty

Of course, just because the doors opened, didn't mean anybody moved. Only a few of the first people actually walked through the doors, because the rest all seemed to get tied up by something standing nearby. McGonagall eventually began to chivvy people along, and when Harry came abreast of the champions standing attentively by the door he saw why.

Alan was standing comfortably next to Luna, cradling her hand on his arm and wearing his annoying-as-Hell confident grin. The only reason it wasn't smug at that moment was because he hadn't done anything yet. But the larger reason people were staring was because Alan wasn't wearing robes: He was wearing a very high quality tuxedo, no tie, a silver shirt, and, in his buttonhole was a vibrant purple-and-blue strange-looking flower. Harry had never admired Alan's self-confidence as much as he did right then, standing with that flower on his lapel and Luna on his arm. But he could certainly appreciate the statement he was making, and for god's sake, even he noticed that Alan's trousers couldn't have fit him any better than those did.

Harry didn't dally too long, though, and quickly ushered Neville, Ron, and their dates into the Great Hall to claim a table. Harry looked up in surprise when someone waved for his attention, and Harry quickly followed the gesture to find a small table for eight with Ginny smiling brightly up at him. Beside her, Blaise was wearing a thin, navy blue overrobe with charcoal grey robes beneath. Beside him, Harry heard Ron hiss between his teeth and Harry gently indicated to Susan to chide him. She did so, casually stepping on Ron's foot, and when he looked up in outrage, Harry shook his head slowly and Ron subsided. Harry threw Susan a bright smile. The advantages of knowing your date well were nice.

Harry nodded and, their group was soon arrayed around the table, Ron across from him, Neville beside Susan, and Harry sitting next to Blaise. Harry gave him a small nod, which Blaise didn't return, and then turned to the entrance. It was worth it. The champions were just entering, and Harry got one good look at Krum and his date in the front and nearly choked. Neville's jaw dropped as he stared, and Ginny squealed.

"Oh, she looks gorgeous! I can't believe that's Hermione!"

Harry felt Susan gently tap his jaw, and he closed his mouth, watching her for a few moments longer before he turned to scan over Fleur in her silver satin, and then turn to look at Alan. Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"That tux is ridiculous."

Susan nodded slowly, and Harry saw her lick her lips. Padma also spoke, quietly, but not quietly enough.

"And I thought Krum's Quidditch clothes were good. Those trousers on that arse ... I hadn't known he had an arse, he's so thin."

Susan burst into giggles, and Padma coloured and looked away, back at the table. Neville just shook his head and frowned. Harry laughed. Honestly, Alan was doing all of that show on purpose. It must be the fact that he was raised American; no respectable Brit would keep up that flaunting attitude. Even a few boys were looking Alan's way, most with jealous expressions. If Harry didn't know Alan so well, he would probably be among those jealous.

The champions took seats among those at the head table. Alan bowed Luna to her seat, and then sat beside her, next to Mr. Templar. Politely, Templar began a conversation. Harry didn't know whether to wish the man luck, or try and imagine the sort of attitude he'd receive from it. It would certainly be amusing.

Turning back to his plate, he took in the menu, and grinned. "Oh, this is grand. Menus."

Susan was already looking through hers and squealed excitedly, "Hannah, I can't believe it! They're offering all kinds of dishes. I haven't ever tasted lamb before, what do you plan on getting?"

Blaise snorted lightly, and eyed the selections speculatively. "How do you suppose we order?"

Neville shrugged. "Maybe you just tell your plate? Hasenpfeffer?" Neville tried. He blinked as a bowl appeared on his plate, filled with the stew. He stifled a snort of amusement. "Good thing I was considering trying that." Shortly, everyone followed his example, and the meal was entered. Harry struggled with how to breach conversation with all four houses sitting at the table. Mind, if he hadn't spent so much time with Alan, Blaise would appear perfectly comfortable to him, but he could pick out tiny signs of stress, from his stiff posture to his tense motions. Determined, Harry smiled at him and picked the only topic that came to mind. He hoped he could be forgiven for being male.

"Blaise, do you follow Quidditch?"

Fortunately for him, Blaise did and could carry a conversation about it. He was fairly certain the girls were despairing of the four men at the table but it got Blaise talking, even with almost good-natured jibes with Ron. Ginny didn't mind; she showed a grasp of Quidditch strategy that had everyone surprised, but the other girls were looking a little despairing. Harry felt he deserved points for making an overture to the boy, at least. They'd all be dancing soon enough. Ginny's grateful look certainly seemed worth it.

The meal ended with a sigh of gratitude from Susan that made Harry wince. They stood, the tables moved to the walls and a platform appeared in the middle of the room, making Harry grin. Susan, beside him, bounced lightly on her feet, and watched transfixed as the Weird Sisters trooped in. Harry still didn't get the band and it's name, but he wasn't arguing and just waited eagerly to see the Champions – or more specifically, Alan - open the Ball. The band struck up a slow, mournful tune, and Alan led Luna into a gentle step. Harry could remember his mother taking him to a muggle show at one time, and there had been a scene much like this. Alan's tuxedo strongly brought the movie to mind, although Luna's rainbow sherbet dress wasn't as fitting. The silvery over robe was the only saving grace that connected her outfit to Alan's, with his silver shirt beneath the coat.

Susan suddenly tugged his arm, and Harry noticed that a few couples had moved onto the dance floor. Harry stepped forward with a small smile, and took Susan out to dance as well, a nice slow step that fit

into the crowd easily. Neville was politely leading Padma a few steps away, and Blaise had taken Ginny up towards Alan. However, Harry couldn't wait for this dance to be over. Slow dances were just not something Harry appreciated much.

The song ended with a last note from the bagpipes, and Susan gave Harry a brilliant smile, brightening even more as the next song was struck up. Harry grinned with her.

"I love this song."

"Me too!" Susan gushed. She grabbed Harry's hands again, and they started dancing once more, much more lively than before, and among nearly the same amount of couples as before. Harry couldn't see any of his friends from where he currently was, but the dance was distracting him. Once it ended, however, he prevailed upon Susan to get some drinks and search them out, which wasn't too hard with another slow song going. Susan apparently liked them as much as he did.

Unsurprisingly, Ron found his way to the refreshments shortly after Harry and Susan did. Harry got his attention, and Ron beamed.

"Harry! You know, Hannah's a really good dancer. Makes even me look good." Hannah blushed lightly, but held onto Ron's arm with a soft giggle. Harry looked at them askance, but smiled.

"Good, you need all the help you can get."

Susan and Hannah both laughed quietly while Ron gave a token protest. Harry grabbed a few cookies, and then pulled Ron to the end of the table so they weren't in the way of other couples. Once there, Hermione came over with a smile and Krum in tow. Harry nodded to the Quidditch player, while Ron frowned slightly. Hermione was beaming.

"Harry, Ron, are you having a good time? Viktor, these are Ronald Weasley, and Harry Potter and their dates um," Hermione looked at the two Hufflepuffs in concern, and Harry stepped forward and nodded to Viktor before introducing Susan.

“Nice to meet you, this is Susan Bones.” Harry then gave Ron a firm look, which made him swallow, and then gently indicate the nervous Hannah.

“Hannah Abbot.” He forced his lips into a weak smile. “It’s … good to meet you too, Viktor.”

“Very good to meet you both.” Viktor answered. “Herm-own-ninny has much to say about you both. All of it is very good. You are good friends.”

“She’s a wonderful friend.” Harry answered, ignoring the odd pronunciation. Viktor nodded, and then Harry noticed behind him a small argument at one of the tables. It almost looked like … a second look proved him right, and he groaned. All of his friends looked as well just in time to see Padma slap Neville and storm off into the dancers. Neville rubbed his cheek a moment, and then sat down sullenly. Harry sighed. “Excuse me. Susan, would you stay here a moment?”

Susan nodded quickly, and turned to ask Hermione something. Harry walked past her and made his way over to Neville, who was sitting at the table with his eyes closed. He didn’t look up as Harry approached. Harry sat comfortably and leaned back.

“Have we ever managed to not offend one of them?”

“No. I didn’t even do anything! Just asked if she wanted to go dance with her sister when she was asking. Seemed to think I wanted to be rid of her, and, well, it was true, I’m not that interested, but I was polite!”

“Why’d you ask if you weren’t even interested?”

“And come without a date?”

“Who cares if you have a date or not?”

Neville merely shrugged, and Harry sighed. "You could claim your dance with Hermione, or come hang out with me and Ron, you know."

Neville shrugged again, and stood. "Not right now. I'll go wander for a bit, see if I can pick up a dance or two. I'll look you up; Ron shouldn't be hard to find and I'll just hope you're nearby."

"Thanks." Harry drawled dryly. "Rub your height in, why don't you. Just keep working at it, the soreness is still there, even."

Neville shook his head, and left, and Harry returned to others. He didn't offer any explanation, and he listened to the present song end, and a slow waltz start. He knew how to waltz; maybe it would take his mind off things. Harry bowed shallowly to Susan.

"May I have this dance?"

She giggled nervously a moment, but accepted his hand as he offered it and pulled her once more to the dance floor. They stayed out for the next two dances, and then Harry found himself dancing next to Alan. He caught Alan's eye moments before the band struck up a lively song. Alan smirked. Harry felt his mouth twitch involuntarily, and met the smirk with one of his own. He paused, and changed the motion of his dance with Susan to almost mirror how Alan was moving, and the dancing became a challenge.

Susan noticed the change, and checked to see who Harry was focused on. Noticing Alan, she frowned slightly, but Harry quickly smiled reassuringly, and she went along with him. She was capable of keeping up, yes, but Harry watched to make sure he didn't push her too much. He could see Alan needed to do the same for Luna. However, they hadn't been dancing long before Harry felt Alan's foot skip over and foul his footing. A quick skip saved him from falling, and Harry spun away for a moment, to glare at him. They met again, and Harry subtly tripped Alan up in turn, and it was Alan's turn to make a quick save. Susan seemed ready to tell Harry off, but the two girls were back to back, and Susan stumbled over Luna's foot. A turn of their partners, and Susan glared at Luna's too-innocent expression. It was then Luna's turn to trip.

They repeated it several times, the partners each trying to trip the other. Alan's surprise was gratifying when Susan tripped him at one point. Apparently he hadn't expected it of a Hufflepuff. However, as the song wound down, Harry was trying to move to pick Susan up for a spin when Alan caught his ankle. Harry nearly fell onto Susan, and Alan couldn't get free in time, stumbling as he lost his balance. To not hurt Susan, however, Harry fell onto one knee and Alan kept his feet, barely, probably due to his wearing a tuxedo instead of robes. Harry turned and jerked his chin gently at Alan, who returned with a smug grin and a bow as the song wound out. Around them, students burst into applause and Harry felt himself blush. Apparently their little show had gathered an audience. Harry stood and bowed to Susan and the crowd as one, and then led her into the crowd and to a table. A minute later, Neville came around and placed a glass before each of them and a plate of cookies in the middle. Ron and Hannah followed with a cup each and one for Neville, all of them sitting around the table with them.

"That was wicked, Harry!" Ron gushed. "I couldn't believe how you could keep that up!" Hannah went to talk with Susan, hushed and excited. Susan practically glowed as she ducked close to talk.

"What were you doing, trying to trip each other all along?" Neville asked Harry, returning his attention to them.

Harry smiled. "Of course."

"I'm surprised Ginny isn't over here to congratulate you." Ron commenting, grabbing a cookie. Harry just shrugged.

"I'm not. Blaise is in Alan's coterie."

Ron snorted into his juice and choked. Neville frowned.

"Why'd he ask Ginny to the Ball, then?"

Harry gave Neville a look questioning his intellect. "He likes her? You don't have to like someone's family to like them, you know. And he's

not stupid enough to come over here when his opinion would likely clash with ours. Considering that I lost, he's probably cautious."

"Wait, you lost?" Ron asked. Beside him, Hannah rolled her eyes. It seemed everyone else at the table did as well. Fortunately for Ron, Hermione and Viktor came over and sat down as well. Hermione beamed at Harry.

"That was a really foolish thing to do, Harry, but you did really well. I'm sorry you lost, though."

"It's fine, Hermione." Harry returned, and tried not to smile at Ron's gobsmacked expression that she'd apparently seen it easily herself. "He almost took himself out with that last, so it's just as well. I almost had him."

Hermione snorted, and Viktor nodded.

"You are a very good dancer, Harry." He commented. "You did very vell. Are you friends with Prince?"

Harry paused and slowly shook his head. "No, we're more rivals actually."

Viktor nodded with a small smile. "Sometimes that's the most fun, rivalry. He does make a good rival. I hadn't thought he'd be up to this tournament, but he's taken it very vell. He did vell against the dragon; didn't even flinch. I couldn't see how he accomplished the last, getting out of the flames."

Harry turned his face carefully blank. "I'm sure it was completely for show, too. He was raised American, and everyone knows how arrogant they can get."

Viktor nodded warmly, and smiled. "Some vould say the British are the same."

Harry grinned and lounged back in his chair with a smile, bringing up his glass up in toast. Viktor, Ron, and the others copied the gesture

before drinking. The cups returned to the table, and Harry leaned closer to Viktor.

“May I ask how you handle being a Quidditch star so young? You’re flying is amazing! My mother nearly faints if I try a Wronski feint.”

Viktor flushed a little, and stiffened, but Harry kept his expression politely interested and didn’t press. Finally, Viktor pulled over a chair and shrugged. “I love flying, so I’m glad to be on the team, and to be able to compete as I do. Do you play seeker?”

Harry grinned. “Gryffindor house team. I’ve never been beaten to the snitch yet, although Alan’s come real close. I think he cheats, though, so I’m definitely the better player.” Harry actually knew that Alan cheated, and that he was only playing to compete against Harry. Alan easily admitted that Harry was the better player, but, with his slight advantage, he was a good challenge so Harry had never complained. He only knew because Alan had told him so anyways. “Look, Viktor, if you don’t want to discuss it, it’s fine. I understand; for crying out loud, kids like me just because my dad’s a war hero and a good auror. I’m not even like my dad.” Harry bit off the complaint, and let it stand as it was, hoping no one noticed the significance of the phrase. He really was getting careless. He needed to talk to Alan, just to remind himself. They hadn’t spoken in too long; the tournament was eating all his time.

Viktor seemed to relax when Harry reassured him of that, and he just smiled faintly, and nodded. “I can understand a dislike for attention.”

“Yeah.” Harry put in, and then took a long drink with a sigh. “Actually, I’m getting rather warm. If you wouldn’t mind, I’m going to step outside. Susan?” Harry turned, and found Susan pulling out of deep conversation with Hannah. She was blushing, but Harry turned a blind eye to it. “I’m going to step outside. Do you mind me leaving you here? I’ll find you again if you want to go dance by yourself or with someone else. I just need some fresh air.”

“Certainly.” Susan beamed at him a little too enthusiastically. “Go right ahead. I’ll be here for a while, but I may step out. Go get your air; you do look warm. That fabric tends towards it, doesn’t it?”

Not wanting to talk about the make of his robes, his very expensive robes, much less around Ron and Viktor, Harry just nodded and stood, walking outside. As he crossed the floor, he scanned the crowd until he found Alan and purposefully walked past, not looking at him and heading straight into the lighted grotto outside. Wandering brought him to a dark, tucked away corner behind several thick bushes, out of the light and not easily accessed. Waiting was easy, and not long after, Alan wandered past, whistling a faint tune. Harry responded in kind, and Alan slowed, stopped, and whistled quietly again. Harry completed the tune, and Alan leaned against the bush for a long moment, and then slipped past and into the corner. Harry couldn't see his face; but he didn't need to. If he couldn't read Alan's voice and subtle moves, he really was out of practice.

The silence held for a long time, and finally, Alan relaxed against the stone wall beside Harry, still silent, simply offering company.

"I've missed you." Harry quietly admitted. He knew Alan would never say the same if he ever felt it, and he'd never have said it himself if he knew either of them was watching the other. "I think I'm getting out of practice." The sterile comment drained the previous words, and moved into their comfortable alliance. "Is the tournament that time-consuming?"

Harry felt Alan shrug; their shoulders were almost touching, so the motion was within range. "It is worrisome. The clue is still nebulous; I haven't figured it out yet."

Harry tilted his head, curious. "What is it?"

"Loud, screechy wailing. Very loud, and completely indecipherable."

"And you can't think what it is, or means?"

"No. It's not even a banshee's wail. I've checked everything I've thought of, and the language spell just doesn't do anything."

"What spell were you using? What if it's some magical creature or something?"

"What creatures sound like that? It isn't a jabberwocky, or a banshee, I already know that." Alan's tone was curious. Harry had a strong interest in magical creatures, and knew many of them offhand. Harry, however, couldn't think of any right then, so he just shrugged, trusting Alan to feel it.

"Maybe you could try Luna? Her father knows a lot of strange trivia. Maybe a crazy point of view will give you some insight."

"She's not crazy, Potter."

Harry winced, and didn't answer. Alan was right; Luna was not crazy, and he was rude to think so. Alan snorted lightly before leaving quietly back into the grotto, easily smoothing down his hair. Harry hoped there were no teachers out there taking note of that. Harry did not want people thinking he and Alan were trysting; he'd be in such deep trouble he might as well have asked Daphne to the Ball. At least then he'd still be straight, despite the Slytherin beau.

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Alan wandered slowly into the circle of Father Christmas and his reindeer, glancing back to see Harry slip out himself and wander another path farther into the darkness. He spared a short thought of gratitude for an empty grotto at that time, and then checked the time. The Ball was almost over, and he needed to get back to Luna. For someone who 'hadn't known how to dance' she handled the ones he'd never gone over very well. He strongly suspected he'd been played, but didn't feel like summoning the energy to be annoyed with the perpetually surprised Ravenclaw. He just didn't think she'd care all that much.

Alan slipped back into the Ball and located Luna in time for a last dance. The applause for the band was joined, and then Alan gave Luna his arm to escort her back to her common room. While they walked, losing the few other couples heading their way by slipping through several secret passages, Luna finally asked about the Tournament.

"After you teleported away from the dragon, how is the egg?"

Determined to not be surprised or put off by her label for his escape, he just shrugged and admitted, "It's still evading me."

"What is it?" Luna asked. She almost seemed to not know what she was asking about.

Alan glanced at her and shrugged. "Wailing. It's not a banshee, and it's no human language."

"Well," Luna observed. "I've known some things communicate by wailing. Ghosts and whales, and my dad has been investigating a few water creatures. Most of them wail."

"Water?" Alan observed. "Haven't tried that. Thank you, Luna." Impulsively, and by a quirk of observation, Alan leaned and gently kissed Luna's cheek, before bowing her to her common room door. After he did so, Alan turned and ran back down the passage to the dungeons, heading straight to his father's rooms and bursting in. A glance up made him stop in place and smile weakly.

"Bad timing?" He asked.

Severus and Green stood opposite each other around the fire, with Geoffrey sitting on the couch chewing on a toothpick. The expressions told him another argument had been going on. It wasn't surprising; Alan would bet good money it was about Green's negligence of safety precautions. Again. Severus hadn't been happy to find out Alan's ability to see thestrals was Green's fault, but then again, Alan had never blamed Green for that one. The deaths had been enough punishment: seven dead to a floating gas that had spread too fast for containment. Alan had been six and too short to breathe it in with it floating at the ceiling. But even thought it was the past, Severus had never been pleased with Green's very casual experiments and security, and Alan didn't ever expect them to get along.

"I need your bath, dad."

Alan ducked as Severus whipped his wand his way, and then winced as something landed in his hair. "Dad! This suit cost damn good money!"

"It's also stain proof. Now, you have egg in your hair and you need a bath. Get."

Alan scowled and stalked through. He could have just said, 'butt out'. Geez. Alan had removed his coat and shirt before he remembered that he needed his egg. Knocking loudly on the door, Alan opened it several seconds later and stuck his head out. Green and Severus had their wands drawn; Geoffrey was standing against the far wall. Alan rolled his eyes.

"I need my golden egg. Stop killing each other and do something productive; I think I might be able to figure it out now, so unless you want me dying for lack of it ..."

Alan tucked his head back behind the door as another spell lashed by his nose. Okay, Severus was in a very bad mood. Not a minute later, something heavy thunked into the door and then was rolled through it. Three locking charms and something Alan suspected was some kind of ward followed. Wonderful. He was stuck in here. What was it with people and keeping things so close? Then again, he'd learned all he knew from them, so he should have a very good idea of that tendency by now. He just didn't like having it used again him.

Once naked, Alan slipped into the large bath, already full, and washed his hair first. He always washed his hair, once a day or more, depending. He hated it when it was oily, and it seemed to be an inherent trait. However, whatever egg Snape had cursed him with was stubborn, so Alan shampooed it up for the second time, washed it to no avail and left it to try his hand at the egg once more. The sound was the same, and Alan shut it quickly, so quickly that it slipped through his grip and dropped into the water. The bath was too deep there for him to grab it without getting his hair wet, and so Alan left it to try the shampoo again. It felt several times cleaner this time, and Alan ducked down with a sigh to rinse. His foot hit the egg, and Alan paused before resurfacing. Immediately, he dove again, and

grabbed the egg, pulling it open. The wailing was now speech, a song. The clue. He listened intently,

'Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour – the prospect's black

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.'

Alan surfaced quickly, the egg in hand and stared at the far wall. They were looking underwater. What underwater creature spoke so coherently? Merpeople. They had refused Being classification in favour of being Beasts because they were offended. So, he supposed there were merpeople in the lake, and so he'd be swimming to fetch them. That was easy: he'd known the Bubblehead charm since shortly after Green's disastrous mistake with the poison gas and he could cast it with ease. Ginger had threatened the potions master with bodily harm if Alan didn't learn some defence. Thus it had first been the charm, and then Green and Geoffrey had made the necklace with a bit of phoenix tear and a Hell of a lot of spell work, which had occupied half the research division of Salem until Ginger ordered them to hand something over and keep testing on their own time ...

The more pressing worry, however, is what they would take. Alan knew he wasn't very attached to too much, so it was almost an amusing thought to try and imagine what they'd take. But losing it after an hour ... would they even do that? Likely it would be points, but if it wasn't ...

Alan huffed and laid back in the bath. He'd probably want to do some laps in the lake now. That water would be freezing; he really should get used to it beforehand. Sighing in irritation, Alan lay back in the bath to wait out the argument in the main room, ruing the turn of events that tied him into the tournament.

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Classes, after the holidays, just seemed to drag themselves into play. No one was eager to return, but it was unavoidable. Most of the House were now spending their time finishing up homework they'd not gotten to until the last minute. Harry had very little left to do, as did Neville, but Ron and the rest of their dorm were almost panicking to get the work done. Ron had a bit of difficulty himself in getting back to work, after he'd blown up at Ginny for accepting Blaise's invitation to the ball. The resultant hexing he'd received was the talk of the school. Whatever it was, the bustle when the first class after the holidays arrived was little different than every other year.

Coming to Care of Magical Creatures, Harry frowned as a small woman awaited them outside Hagrid's hut. The class came together as a group, and Harry glanced over the hut, seeing the curtains pulled closed and a faint scrabbling on the door. Once the class was all together, the woman stepped aside and snapped, "Follow me, I'm Professor Grubby-plank, you're temporary Care of Magical Creatures professor."

Harry followed, curious, and trailed Ron as he pulled to the front, to ask, "Professor, where's Hagrid?"

"Never you mind, son." She snapped. "None of your business."

"Hagrid's our friend!" Ron growled.

"Never you mind." The professor snapped again, and put out her arm to stop them. Harry finally looked up and stopped, staring in awe at the beautiful unicorn tethered before them, in a clearing just past the Beauxbatons' carriage. "Boys stay back. They prefer the woman's touch, unicorns."

Harry pulled Ron over and stood in place as Hermione gently brushed past. Unfortunately, as Professor Grubbly-plank moved forward to keep an eye on the girls and talk loudly enough for the boys to hear as well, Draco moved closer to their group with a faint smile. Harry noticed him keep a hostile eye on Alan as well, who, standing with Blaise and Theodore, appeared completely unconcerned about the other boy. Harry watched him come with a dark look.

“Missing your giant buddy?” Draco hissed. “Maybe he’s too ashamed to show his face.” Draco tossed an article to the ground at Harry’s feet, and Ron bent to pick it up before Harry could tell him not to. Nothing happened, so he moved closer to read past Ron’s shoulder. The entire article pointed out that Hagrid, besides his infatuation with dangerous creatures, was half-giant. Harry mouthed the point to himself and then shook his head. The thought just didn’t mesh. Ron paled a moment, but Harry just scoffed.

“Clearly Hagrid didn’t get that set of genes.”

Ron paused a moment, and then shrugged. “Maybe his creatures are the most dangerous things about him. He’s certainly more dangerous than most of them, if he could ever stop being so infatuated with them.”

Harry laughed, and flinched as Professor Grubbly-plank summoned their attention again. Draco’s smile fell away as Harry and Ron didn’t seem to care about the article at all, and he returned to his friends with a sullen glower.

After the class, the other students were enthralled with the lesson about unicorns, and Hermione was beaming until the article was placed before her. Neville, joining them at lunch, came over just as she finished.

“Hagrid’s half-giant?” She whispered. Neville sat hard and stared, before grabbing at the paper.

“How the Hell did she overhear that? Bloody hell, that idiot ...”

“Neville.” Harry whined. He was dancing around something he knew that they didn’t again. Neville flushed, and explained.

“During the ball, I wandered the grotto and came across Hagrid talking to Madame Maxine. He was asking her about her parents, because clearly they’re two of a kind, and then the big oaf said it clear out loud that he was half-giant. I hadn’t meant to overhear, but I didn’t see anyone else who could have overheard. Not a soul, but she must have.”

Ron glared at Neville. “And you didn’t tell us?”

Neville merely glared back. “I wasn’t supposed to have overheard it myself, Ronald. I’m not going to start blabbing it if it’s unimportant. I didn’t know someone else was going to do it anyways. It’s not polite to just talk about that sort of stuff. How’d you like someone to play around that you’re afraid of spiders if the whole class didn’t already know due to Professor Lupin?”

Ron flushed, and growled. “Oh, and you never bothered facing it, did you? Neither you nor Harry.”

Harry looked down at his plate and didn’t speak, knowing without looking that Neville’s eyes flashed. Only two people knew what Harry’s boggart was, and that was Remus and Neville. Neither would ever bring it up, and Remus wouldn’t have dared let him face that fear in front of other students, something Harry was infinitely grateful for. Neville had seen his as well, getting Harry’s away, but his wasn’t anywhere near as personal.

“Ronald, our fears are our own.” Neville growled. “You volunteered; Harry and I met up with a boggart years ago, and Remus knows what it is. They’re not something that would be best flaunted in front of the others, and it’s not something we’re going to share. Excuse me.” Neville stood abruptly, and slapped Harry’s wrist gently. Harry quickly grabbed his bag, a roll and cheese, and walked out with him, absolutely silent. They’d wandered up the corridors towards their Arithmancy class, and finally, after a long while, they stopped and Neville gently placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Sorry about that. Ron was just being a prat.”

“Neville, you don’t have to explain yourself to me. I was there. I know.”

“Harry ...”

“Neville, just don’t.” Harry shrugged out of the touch and moved to the wall beside the door, fishing a book out of his bag and glancing over it without seeing the text. Neville stopped fighting him and leaned against the far wall in silence himself. Harry didn’t want to talk about it. Neville had never managed to get him to, and if Harry got his way, he never would. As much as Neville had included himself with Harry, they weren’t even on the same level. Neville’s wouldn’t have hurt had the class seen; it was just Death Eaters. Remus never would have hurt James’ reputation as to let the class see that his son feared him, no matter how convoluted the reason.

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January brought a Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry was very glad to go. Neville had once more attached himself to Hermione, much to her delight, and drifted off on their own, leaving him with Ron to wander through Zonko’s and Honeydukes before heading to the Three Broomsticks to meet up with Neville once more. They had barely taken their seats when they were set upon by a tall, thin woman with blonde curls and a precise face. Harry recognized her from his father’s repeated grumbling about reporters: Rita Skeeter. She made it clear why she was there very quickly.

“Harry Potter! Why, I’ve had a delightful time interviewing your father. But here we have it, you’re at Hogwarts and you are currently represented by an underage Slytherin in the Tournament. I’ve heard you and Prince are at each other’s throats. Do you have anything to say in particular about him?”

Harry felt rather surprised she hadn’t backed off from his glare; he was pulling on everything Alan had ever told him about how to make people back off, but he supposed reporters didn’t often heed those warnings. Ron looked annoyed as well; anyone close to the ministry

would have something to say about Ms. Skeeter, and little of it would be good.

“No, Ms. Skeeter. I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Why not? He’s certainly not doing you any favours, boy. He cheated his way in, and now he’s already cheated on the tasks. The little snitch shouldn’t even be in there, and he’s got himself set up for a thousand galleon prize and national recognition. Such a prize should only go to those worthy.”

Harry gave Ms. Skeeter a chilly smile, thanking every deity he could think of that Ron hadn’t jumped and said something he shouldn’t have. Even if Harry had hated Alan, he wouldn’t have turned him over to this harpy.

“Why Ms. Skeeter,” Harry sweetly drawled, “I’m sure you old housemates wouldn’t like to hear you talking about them that way.”

Ms. Skeeter’s smile took on the same chilly edge his held. “I see you have the same attitude as your father, Potter. Well, do you have anything to say, Wesley?”

“It’s Weasley.” Ron growled. “And no, I don’t. I wouldn’t say anything to a person like you even if it is about a Slytherin. Even they don’t deserve your writing.”

Ms. Skeeter stood abruptly and gave them a brilliant smile. “Marvellous. I’ll see you around, then.” She swept off quickly, her photographer following with hurried steps, passing Neville and Hermione on their way out. Both came over without any preamble, and Neville gave Harry a concerned look.

“You alright? Lemme guess, she wanted dirt on Prince.”

“Of course.” Harry smiled brightly. “Who else do I hate enough in the school to have an opinion I might give to a bloodthirsty harpy? Well, Draco, but I’m sure Lucius is coating her pockets every chance he gets so she’ll leave him and his alone unless something really juicy comes up.”

Harry was cut off by a cold growl from the doorway.

"Look, you slimy insane bitch, back off, shut up, and cut the shit before I cinder your bag and quill, and unravel your robes. I don't have time to deal with twisted and malignant leeches, so let me past before I flambé you. I don't have time for delicate manoeuvring among politics, so back the fucking Hell off."

The entire room in the Three Broomsticks looked up as Alan stormed in and glanced around. Apparently all he was looking for was an empty table, as he stalked to the first he saw, and sat down abruptly. Unfortunately, Rita came back in and went over to him. Her approach didn't last, as Alan growled in frustration and slammed to his feet, stalking back out towards the door. Rita grabbed his arm as he passed, and he turned a glare darker than anything Harry had ever seen before on her. She didn't even flinch.

"Does the name Amber Callough mean anything to you, Prince?" She asked. Her tone was too innocent. Harry heard the name and froze. Rita could not be that stupid. She couldn't.

However, Harry had the view to see Alan's glare not move an inch, but his body changed from merely angry to absolutely cold instantly. It looked like he'd relaxed, but oh ... Skeeter mustn't have been Slytherin to not heed the warning, or else she was just that stubborn.

"Ms. Skeeter." Alan intoned. His voice was oh so calm, simply velvet lined steel. "If you do not want to lose more than you have, you will cease and desist, and you will leave me the fucking Hell alone. Pursuit along those lines will gain you more hostility than you can handle from more fronts than you could hope to tackle. Back off, you stupid bitch." Alan finished in a growl, ripping his arm from her grasp and turning and striding out the door once more, brushing past Ginny and Blaise on his way out. Blaise didn't even look at him, although Ginny did in curiosity. He merely looked at Ms. Skeeter, and turned around to leave, whispering something in Ginny's ear. Ms. Skeeter was too focused on her zooming quill to bother.

Harry knew that Alan was going to be attacked by her eventually for all his brusqueness, and he hated the helpless feeling engendered by his inability to defend his friend. However, apparently he wasn't the only one feeling that way.

"That horrible bitch." Hermione growled under her breath. "Attacking him like that, when he was just trying to get by. C'mon, I don't want to sit here with her; let's go do something productive, like drag Hagrid out of his hut. He's been hiding way to long, and for that stupid bitch's attitude."

Harry gratefully followed Hermione out of the pub, Neville and Ron trailing behind. Once they reached Hagrid's, Hermione pounded loudly on the door.

"Hagrid, open this door at once! No one out here right now cares your mother was a giantess, Hagrid, so open up and let us in! Don't you dare let that horrible Skeeter woman's attitude affect you; she's not here, so open this door!" She hollered.

Finally, the door was pulled open, and Hermione prepared to continue her lecturing until she saw that it was Dumbledore. She looked sheepish for a moment, until Dumbledore pulled the door open wide and waved her and the others in. Harry and Neville went, and both took a seat by Hagrid's sides.

"Hi Hagrid," Harry stated. Ron and Neville echoed him, and Hagrid, seated on his bed in the corner sniffled loudly and waved back. Dumbledore merely nodded and magicked more tea and cups about before taking a seat himself.

"I presume you heard what Ms. Granger was shouting outside, Hagrid?" Hagrid nodded slowly at Dumbledore's benevolent tone. "Judging by their attempt to break down your door, I'd say these children still want to know you."

"Of course we do, Hagrid!" Ron insisted. "You just ..."

"Need to tone down the danger level." Neville finished. "Not everyone's as big as you, so the kids can get frightened by the huge

animals you bring in. But that's completely unrelated to you being half-giant, Hagrid. That's certainly not going to turn me against you." Neville finished, smiling.

Harry put his hand on Hagrid's knee. "Hagrid, you can't change who your parents are, but what you got from each of them is distinct and unique. I think it's blatantly clear that whatever your mother gave you, it's not dangerous or cause for concern and neither can you, nor should you change it. You're still a good friend."

Hagrid blew his nose loudly into a handkerchief and put a hand in turn on Harry's shoulder, making Harry wince and sag in his seat uncomfortably.

"I hear you, all of you. But ... but you're not half-giant. Not everybody wants me back ..."

Harry shrugged out of Hagrid's hand, and stood in front of him, glaring. "Hagrid, not everybody will ever be in agreement. Hell, people don't like my dad and the way he behaves, but he's not hiding. Neither's Sirius, or Remus. Do I have to lose another teacher just because people don't think you're the right breed to be able to handle kids? I never thought race was a matter; I sure as Hell wouldn't want Mr. Malfoy or Filch teaching me, and they're fully 'human'. I'd much rather a werewolf, or a half-giant. Hell, I'd take a full-blooded giant if it could teach! This is all so stupid! Bugger this stupid attitude of wizards; they're a bunch of stupid loonies!" Harry raged.

Hagrid watched Harry rant with a look of surprise, as did Dumbledore. Coming down off of it, Harry flushed, and stepped aside with a mumbled apology. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Things like those need to be voiced, Harry. The world does not realise the injustice we perpetrate in our desire for everyone to be the same. Thank you."

Harry didn't look at Dumbledore as he listened. He wasn't sure he wanted to know that Dumbledore thought him brave for saying that, and for voicing his opinion. He'd not had a high opinion of Dumbledore for years after overhearing a howler sent to him before

second year while Dumbledore was visiting at the Longbottom house. He'd found out later the howler had been sent by Alan's aunt and uncle, but ever since then he'd been cautious around the old man. Now, as he grew, he was finding out many different things, and he didn't know what to do with his opinion anymore.

"I will not accept your resignation, Hagrid, and expect to see you at breakfast on Monday, no excuses. Good evening, children." Dumbledore swept from the hut, leaving Harry with his friends to finish off reassuring Hagrid. Harry did so with a faint thoughtful air, and said little, even on the trip back up to the castle.

A/N: There! No really big cliffy. See, I do love you all. Thank you so very much to those who reviewed! I want to especially thank 'Beware of trips' - thank you for reading from the beginning, and all your reviews! A big hug to you!

Next chapter in two weeks. The Second Task, and other interesting stuff. Please read and review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-one

Nothing exciting happened in the time between Hagrid finally calming down and the week leading up to the Second Task. Alan was distracted once more while he and Harry sat together in the library. Rita hadn't made any articles other than her usual spitfire against the ministry, and Harry felt that Alan may have just been in a really foul mood that evening, and nothing really was wrong. He refused to speak at any length on the likelihood of Rita actually finding anything out about Amber, Alan's mother, and he also refused to discuss anything about the second task beyond saying that he had it in the bag.

Three days before the task, Harry stood from their discussions and stretched, hoping stretching his body would be able to do something for the tight feeling in his head that came after Alan had grilled him on proper behaviour and Slytherin turn-of-phrase. Since he'd mentioned that he felt he was rusty at the Yule Ball, Alan had taken to throwing snippets of previous conversations at Harry to see if he could get a rise out of him, or another reaction. Harry took them with grace and was expected to throw a similar barb back. He didn't always succeed. They had finished for the evening; Harry had missed three cues, and so Alan just shook his head and fell silent, but Harry had another question in mind, brought up from the back of his conscious by Neville almost a month ago now.

"Alan, have I ever inquired as to your boggart?"

Alan glanced up with a sharp look, and smiled faintly. "No, I brought it up myself, didn't I? Second year."

Harry paused, and then shook his head weakly. "Yeah, you did, didn't you?" Harry quickly gathered his books. Alan had figured out Harry's boggart without any help all those years ago. It wasn't something Harry felt comfortable with, and had been a lot happier having almost forgotten that Alan knew.

"Harry." Alan's voice stopped him before he could leave. "You're still scared." His tone made it sound disbelieving. "Is it really that frightening to you?"

Harry half-turned and gave Alan a dark look. "You just don't understand, Alan. You've never had someone hate something so bitterly in front of you. Slytherin, your father ... James hates both of those, alright? And here I am, his son," Harry bit the word off and gave a bitter, choked laugh, "friend and conspirator with you and that house. I can't help being a parselmouth, but I shouldn't be friends with you if I could help it."

"That's why you never asked Daphne?" Alan idly inquired. "She's a Slytherin?"

"She's something my father would hate. I won't put her through that."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled you let your fear get in the way." Alan finished coldly.

Harry bit back his frustration and shame and left without looking back.

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Alan hadn't been pleased to wake up the morning of the twenty-fourth, but he did so anyways and arrived in plenty of time with the others, wearing his robe over a pair of long racing shorts, skin tight and covering most of his thighs. That water was still simply freezing. The announcement of what was to be taken still hadn't happened, but he had a sneaking suspicion when he caught sight of Velorian Mayfair and the vampire Koreol in the stands without Andrew. He was still fighting the conflict that brought up, most of which ended in humour.

Apparently Geoffrey didn't truly trust Dumbledore, but precisely what part of trapping the boy underwater could kill a vampire?

"The champions have gathered to begin their task, which will lead them on an underwater hunt for that which was taken from them, the person they will miss the most." Mr. Bagman loudly announced. Alan was glad they'd only used Andrew and not his godfather, who truly held that position in his heart. Geoffrey, however, wouldn't have let Dumbledore near the man with a ten-foot pole. "For Viktor Krum, Hermione Granger."

Alan twitched with the rest of the crowd and looked over at Viktor curiously.

“For Fleur Delacour, Gabrielle Delacour.”

Alan nodded, presuming a sister. Makes sense; it was his brother taken. But ...

“For Alan Prince, Andrew Mayfair.”

Several of the looks he received made Alan sigh. Great. Rumours of infidelity abound.

“The champions will enter the water in a few moments, giving them that time to prepare. They have the time limit of one hour to regain what was taken. Champions ...”

Alan quickly shed his robe and double-checked the spell on his hair. It was short, but long enough to get in his eyes if he wasn’t careful, thus he’d spelled it back and flat. He moved quickly to the water’s edge, and then glanced back at the judges and the other champions. They were spaced ten feet apart along the bank, both Fleur and Viktor dressed in bathing outfits of their own, Fleur’s hair tied back in a braid. Mr. Bagman stood behind them smiling, and motioned to Mr. Templar.

“Three ... two ... one ... Go!”

Alan took another long look at the water, and then confidently strode into it, his wand held firm in his right hand. He quickly and silently cast the bubblehead charm, and then, finally far enough out, he dove into the water, starting downwards several feet before he quickly cast Point Me, focusing on Andrew. The wand spun, and pointed farther and deeper down. Alan tucked it away in the slot on his shorts before he began to swim confidently down where it had pointed. The water was cold as ice and dark and grimy, with long weeds straining towards the light from the bottom. Alan kept above it, not wanting to face whatever could be within, swimming confidently but feeling the

cold dragging at him. Annoyed, he paused, and pulled his wand, casting a quick warming charm.

A tug on his ankle dragged him rather abruptly down, and Alan started. A look, and the dark eyes of a grindylow stared up at him. Alan slashed his wand, the grindylow dropped back and then another rose beside it. A glance ahead proved him to be in the midst of a small group, and Alan swore to himself, before he cast three spells in succession. The grindylows ahead scattered from the scalding water, and Alan kicked forward quickly, tossing spells over his shoulder to keep them off his back. One grabbed at his shorts, and Alan twisted to quickly send an obscure spell it's way, leaving it with a great glob of ink covering it's head. Alan passed easily thereafter, as the others went to the inked one to try and clean it off.

Alan was grateful that the bubblehead charm spared him the water pressure on his ears, and continued deeper and deeper still. He tried not to think of what might happen were the Giant squid to arrive. While his wand was still out, Alan quickly cast Point Me and found himself off track. Correcting his aim and still swearing to himself, Alan pressed forward. The first hint of his imminent arrival was the beginnings of another song like the one he'd heard from the egg. He passed a large rock with a painting on it, and came to a small village, where faces peered eerie and solemn from behind the weedy curtains. Alan quickly passed the village with only short glances about; he wanted out of here, and fast.

The village square came into view, and Alan paused to assess the gathering. There were many merpeople gathered, most with spears and knives in hand, and others who were singing the haunting choir to draw the champions down. Alan felt a little miffed as they announced it was at half time. Moving forward, he approached the statue in the middle, of an unidentified merperson with three people tied to his tail. One had Hermione's bushy hair and the other was small, female and blonde. The last was Andrew, tied with his own pale hair ruffling in the current and looking restless even under the sleep spell. Then again, Andrew just didn't like being asleep period. He didn't really need to sleep, as a vampire, so such spells fought his nature. When he did sleep it was rather synonymous with 'dead' for the duration – of about four hours if you were lucky. But this wasn't it.

Alan swam over cautiously, keeping one eye on the merpeople, and the other on Andrew. When they did nothing against him, Alan turned his attention to Andrew's bonds, and pulled his wand to curse them off. They went, and Andrew sank weakly to the bottom. Alan half considered waking him; trying to swim with a literal dead body would not be pleasant as Andrew wasn't even mildly buoyant like normal people, but he swam really well when awake. Alan was spared the decision as he felt a strange spell flow past, and Andrew's eyes snapped wide open, inhaling as though to yell. Instead he choked when he inhaled water.

Alan grabbed his shoulder, wide-eyed. If it had been anyone but Andrew, waking him up would have been a death sentence. Someone was trying to sabotage this task, and more specifically, kill whoever was closest to Alan ... the simple foil was the luck that Andrew was undead, nothing more. Although that yell was rather his fault ...

Andrew grabbed his shoulder with a look of outrage on his face as he expansively indicated the surroundings. Alan relaxed and rolled his eyes – for the moment, it was over – and spoke behind the bubble; Andrew could just guesstimate what he was saying.

"Yes, we're still underwater, no, you shouldn't have woken up, and no I don't know why. How about swimming topside, brat?"

Andrew watched him carefully, took in the gesture that went generically upwards, and, with a mocking mouthing of random, likely uncouth words, he gestured for Alan to follow him as they swam back the way Alan had come, arching farther towards the surface of the lake than before, Andrew swimming in the lead as the stronger swimmer, completely unaffected by cold and the water he'd inhaled. Alan wondered how much that extra weight was dragging him down, but shelved the question for later. With his enhanced strength, it didn't really matter that much.

They were swimming up and towards the bank; slowly the water lightened as the surface neared, and then Andrew straightened and Alan surfaced shortly after he did. A glance around found them very

near the bank, with none of the other champions in sight. Alan swiped at Andrew's head before swimming quickly towards the bank, not bothering to remove the bubblehead charm and leaving his 'hostage' behind. Andrew caught up fast enough, and they both got out, Alan fetching his wand, and Andrew quickly turning back over the water to hack up what all he had inhaled other than air.

As soon as he stopping coughing, Alan shifted and then kicked him off the bank and back into the water. Andrew fell with an undignified curse and a splash. Behind him, Alan heard someone mutter something that couldn't have been polite at all. A look proved him correct that it was Velorian, Andrew's father. He didn't have much time to grin as Andrew clambered back out and glared down at him.

"You're lucky I'm already dead; I almost inhaled more bloody water you idiot! Where's the fucktard that cast that stupid sleeping spell, anyways? Dumblefuck? I need to have a few words with him."

Dumbledore had the timing to step over then. Alan would have advised against it. He was now standing in between Andrew, Velorian and Koreol, all three of whom would be lighting into him the moment Andrew brought up his rather rude awakening at the bottom of the lake.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Mayfair? I'd thought you went to sleep fine."

"I slept fine, sir," Andrew snapped, "but I was not supposed to wake up the moment Alan cut me free, was I? Had I been human, I likely would have freakin' died! I think it's a damn good thing I was the only one they allowed you to use as Alan's hostage, and not someone else. Are you so incompetent that you can't keep one person safe? Gracious lord, that was stupid!"

Dumbledore's expression darkened, and Alan stood slowly next to Andrew, impressed in spite of himself at Dumbledore's strength of presence.

"Are you telling me someone tried to kill Alan's hostage?" He asked quietly.

Alan gently nodded, bringing attention to himself. "Perhaps whoever it is, is trying to make me regret my position? Or something." Alan shrugged negligently. "But if Andrew had not been a vampire, he would have been badly hurt if not dead. I could have easily gotten him a bubblehead charm, but he'd inhaled a lot of water right off the bat. Mind, that's his fault," Alan drawled playfully, "so I'm not sure about that one."

"If that mediwitch didn't look like she was about to jump both of us, I'd shove you back into the water, Alan." Andrew threatened. He burst into a grin. "Instead, I think I'll just drag you over to her. Sirs, I'll leave you to it."

Andrew nodded to Dumbledore, his father, and mentor each in turn, and then took the arm he'd grabbed of Alan's and dragged him over to Madam Pomfrey, who descended on both of them with blankets and a vengeance. She even insisted that Andrew drink a warm potion and wrap in a blanket, same as Alan, despite his reassurances that he was dead and didn't really need such creature comforts. Alan accepted the care gratefully, and sat back to wait. He'd no sooner started to sit than the stands erupted into noise once more. A glance across the lake showed him a rather frightening sight of a shark's head next to Hermione's thick brown hair. Shortly, the shark's head shimmered and changed to Viktor's Krum's sharp face, and he and Hermione swam back over to the shore, where Madam Pomfrey set upon them ferociously, forcing potions and blankets on them as well, and hustling them over to the seats where Alan and Andrew already were. Andrew immediately stood and offered his spot, three away from Alan, to her, and then sat down right next to Alan, keeping an appreciative eye on Hermione until Viktor gave him a firm glare. Andrew turned a hurt look back to Alan who rolled his eyes and stared across the water once more. Fleur was taking a really long time.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who thought so as Hermione asked about her shortly thereafter. Andrew swiped Alan's wand and cast Tempus. Small numbers floated up and Andrew read them off,

"Ten to eleven. She's twenty minutes off, isn't she?"

Alan merely nodded. Hermione gave him a firm look. "Andrew Mayfair, right?"

"Yes ma'am," Andrew responded, smiling disarmingly, "it's very nice to make your acquaintance."

Alan rolled his eyes, "Andrew, stop flirting with everything that moves and keep in mind that she's taken. No moving in on her allowed."

Viktor carefully sent a smile Alan's way, and Andrew leaned back and pouted. Alan smiled back, even knowing that he wasn't necessarily speaking of Krum when he labelled Hermione taken. It just worked to say it in general, as he knew at least three people were in line behind Krum, and, for Harry, Alan would defend her from Andrew's inappropriate advances.

After a few minutes, Andrew got bored of sulking and tried to complain. Alan hadn't said a word this time, but they knew each other too well. The complaints were standard. "Alan, I wasn't making inappropriate advances, I was just com-"

"Andrew, any advances of yours are inappropriate, and I don't care if you were simply 'complimenting' her. She's out of bounds; deal with it. Hey, look. I think Fleur's returning."

He was indeed correct, but she wasn't returning on her own power. She came up with an escort of merpeople, cuts bleeding on her face, and her sister in the arms of one of the merfolk. They brought them back to the shore, handing them to the tender mercies of Madam Pomfrey, and one of them broke off to speak with Dumbledore. Several minutes later, a short conference was held, and then Mr. Templar announced the scores.

"We have deliberated and will award points out of fifty for each champion. Alan Prince used the bubblehead charm and returned first; ten minutes within the hour, with his hostage awake without leave. However, no spell was cast to wake him from Alan's wand, which indicates sabotage that fortunately failed. We award him forty-eight points."

"Guess I was supposed to drag you up, awake or not, bucko." Alan drawled. Andrew hit him in the shin.

"Like I would have laid still for that." Andrew griped good-naturedly.
"One of them's probably just sore anyways."

"Viktor Krum arrived second, having used incomplete transfiguration to great success. We award him forty points."

"Miss Fleur Delacour also used the bubblehead charm, and returned well outside the time limit, having fought off grindylows on the way down and then running afoul them on the way back once more. She was rescued by the merfolk, and brought back safely. We award her twenty-eight points."

Fleur looked surprised, and turned aside; beside Alan, Andrew sniffed and turned away. Alan just sighed in amusement; Andrew always seemed to be antsy about something. Alan suspected he didn't like veela: too much like competition. A gentle knock on the head brought his attention back, and Alan smiled warmly at him, a gesture that took Andrew off guard, although he did return it.

"You staying for dinner?"

"Ask Koreol. That also depends on what I get for dinner ..." Andrew eyed Alan suggestively, and Alan rolled his eyes, standing abruptly to throw him off. Templar continued his final announcement.

"The third and final task will take place on the twenty-fourth of June. The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you for the support you have shown your champions!"

The gathered students moved aside and easily flowed back towards the school. Alan moved on his own way, hustled along by Madam Pomfrey and tailed by his father and Andrew's. Severus seemed to be eyeing the vampire and wizard with concern, but Koreol shortly made an overture and he seemed to relax alongside Velorian. Alan smiled contently and continued on, throwing an arm around Andrew's shoulders, pleased that their heights now matched.

“Maybe you will get something interesting for a meal.”

Alan almost regretted the phrase as Andrew looked him over in a very suggestive manner, but he didn’t remove his arm quite yet. There were still several options for keeping him in line, and he really hadn’t seen him for too long. What was a little blood between friends?

Andrew shifted, and Alan quickly pushed him away before continuing walking ahead. Madam Pomfrey glared until he gave her an innocent look, and then she shook her head in exasperation, continuing on. Alan stuck his tongue out at Andrew as they continued their path. Maybe there was a bit more to it than just indulging a friend ... Andrew was going to have to earn that.

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“So ...” Neville offered.

Harry glanced up at him from the small huddle they had in the library over their homework and raised his eyebrow. A glance proved that Ron had wandered out of sight and Hermione was most likely searching for another book. It was a week after the second task, and Harry had already heard from Alan that he was fine and surprisingly in a good mood. Harry hadn’t asked.

“Are we ever going to indulge ourselves in that book we really shouldn’t own?” Neville inquired once more. It took Harry a moment to think of just what book that might be; he owned several he shouldn’t but ... Remembering, he considered tapping his head on the table but finally, he simply rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Well, I don’t suppose there’s any reason not to.” Harry hedged. “But do we really have time?”

Neville huffed. “Harry, I’ve already read the book. I’m half waiting for you to read it as well, but somehow I don’t think you’ll get around to it anytime soon. It’s not that hard; should we at least try the beginning stages? Those should be pretty easy.”

Harry marked his place, closed his book and shuffled his papers into order before reluctantly nodding. Hermione came back as they were leaving, but she took their excuses with ease; she'd seen them working, and didn't mind the quiet at all, although the dark look she sent the way of Ron's abandoned work promised a hearty lecture once he returned. Harry and Neville were glad to be out of that one.

Their leaving took them to a small room Neville had apparently selected for being an abandoned classroom on the upper levels of the school. Harry presumed he'd found it with the map, and they settled quietly in as Harry stretched and inquired quietly as to how on earth you were supposed to start. Neville, of course, immediately consulted the book.

"A sprinkling of rosemary mixed with mugwort and henbane, dusted over the forehead before falling into meditation."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Henbane?"

"Yes, henbane." Neville huffed. "We're not eating it; it's just going to be ground up and you're supposed to lie down the meditate anyways for about twenty or so minutes. I'll set an alarm on my wand for thirty minutes; the door's locked, so we shouldn't be disturbed. Whatever your animal is, it should manifest itself undeniably to you during the time you meditate and then you'll have your answer of what you're going to try for."

Harry looked at Neville dubiously, but laughed and accepted. "Fine, fine. I'll presume you have the mix, then, since you're ever so eager?"

"Yep, mate, I do." Neville rolled over and grabbed a small jar out of his bag. "Hope you don't mind lying on the floor."

Harry shrugged out of his robes, leaving him in his trousers and shirt before lying back with the robe as a pillow. "For a half-hour? To become an Animagus? Not a whit."

Neville laughed and pulled his own robe off to make a pillow and worked the lid on the bottle open. "Good. There are other options;

there's a potion you could make, or a complicated sleep spell. Different people need different help to figure out exactly what they've got, but this one's easiest. I don't really get the spell, and we'd probably need you to talk Alan into making the potion if we wanted to be sure we got it right. It's hellishly complicated."

Harry closed his eyes tightly as Neville rubbed a tiny amount of the mix over his forehead for him and smiled. "He'd love the challenge. So, we just relax and let it work?"

"That's what the book says." Neville allowed. "If it doesn't work, we get a half hour nap. We're the only ones here, so if it's wrong, oh well."

Harry laughed once more, but he didn't want to open his eyes as he felt himself begin to simply relax. His laughter faded and the space behind his eyes sank into deep grey fuzz as his breathing slowed and deepened. He could feel himself slipping into the deep trance, and slowly an image grew across his eyelids.

It started out as plants and a scene of nature, with dark crawling vines and large, towering trees. He was standing in murky water, with rich wet smells assaulting his nose. Off to one side, a stepped pyramid towered, and musty heat beat against his thin skin, warming him. There was a feeling of floating, and suddenly he was looking down at a lithe looking lizard, crouched ankle-deep in a film of water around the tree roots. His gaze moved as he felt like he was standing by the creature, and quickly Harry strolled around it, feeling confused. He'd never heard of a creature like this. It was a long-legged lizard, its shoulder level with his solar plexus and its body long and thin, like a greyhound but longer and much larger. The scales were dark and shimmering, similar to a snake's, and the creature had no horns, no wings; it was completely streamlined.

Suddenly, the animal dashed forward, running as though flying through the water and trees as it raced after whatever had caught its attention. The motion knocked Harry off balance, and he fell back towards the water. He was certain to splash down in mere moments –

Harry jerked as his eyes opened, showing him the abandoned classroom once more. Carefully, he wiped his forehead off, coming away damp and sweaty and covered in the herbs. Across from him, Neville was already sitting up, smiling brightly. Harry gave him a wry smile.

“What’d you get?”

“A horse.” Neville announced. “Large dark Arabian. I could run for miles on end!”

Harry couldn’t help it; he laughed. “Yeah, you’re definitely a runner.”

Neville rolled his eyes, but turned back to Harry. “You?”

Harry paused, and shrugged. “I dunno. I’ve never heard of anything like it.” Neville tilted his head to the side, and Harry sighed. “Some kind of lizard, about even with mid-chest at its shoulders. It’s long, thin, svelte and dark grey-green, shiny like dragon scale but put together like a snake’s skin. But it didn’t have any wings or horns or anything. Just some weird long-legged lizard.”

Neville pulled at his lip, and sighed. “I think maybe you should use the potion, to try and get clarification. And ask Sirius about how his worked out; he’s got an abnormal animal as well. If you don’t mind me moving ahead ...”

“Not at all, Neville.” Harry laughed. “I want to see you as a horse; don’t hold yourself back for me. Um,” Harry eyed the book a moment, and Neville chuckled, handing it over easily.

“I trust Alan not to rat us out, Harry.” Neville then tossed the jar of herbs as well. “He can try for his animal while he’s at it, too. Payment for helping.”

Harry smiled. “I’ll get it back to you as soon as possible. Maybe he’ll have time to work on it while he waits for the next task to come clearer.”

Neville nodded, and stood, quickly throwing his robe back on. "I want to know everything, though." Neville grinned. "We have to do research on what form we're taking, so we'll be a while before we all have a solid answer, you know. Have to wonder how much mum knows, though."

"Our mothers would have a collective fit if they knew."

Neville nodded slowly. "Yeah ... maybe I'll tell her once I'm finished. I really want her to see."

Harry smiled faintly. "I'd like mum to see too. Whatever else it is that ... dragon is gorgeous."

Neville laughed faintly, pulling out the parchment Marauders Map. "Harry Potter, a dragon. Think you'll be willing to tell your dad that?"

Harry paused, and then nodded. "Yeah, I think I can. Although I'll be writing Sirius, mostly. Maybe to all the Marauders ..."

Neville watched him for a long moment, and then sighed. "Something tells me you won't be informing him it's a green dragon."

Harry argued back. "I'm not going to lie about it, Neville."

"No, but you just won't mention colour, will you? Or the snake-skin."

"I had no intentions of leaving anything out."

Neville's expression shut down into scorn, and he growled as he turned and walked away. Harry continued slowly towards the lower levels, brooding. He had no intention of not telling them everything about his Animagus. He wasn't that scared. You can't pick your form, can you? It's all about chance. Furious, Harry stormed into the common room and up to his bed, secluding himself behind the curtains of his bed to write the letter to the Marauders.

To The Marauders,

I, son of Prongs, have a problem. I don't quite know what my Animagus form is. It's a tall, long lizard, somewhat dragon-like but no wings or horns anywhere. It's got tiny ears, but it's long and thin in body and carnivorous. I had some sort of feel like it was in a rainforest. The dragon, I've decided to call it a dragon, comes to about mid-chest.

Padfoot, help? How do I figure out how to complete the change? We're thinking we need the potion; does that sound right?

Humbly,

Son of Prongs

Harry sighed and sealed the letter, leaving his bed to jog up to the Owlery. He was not in denial of anything, and he wasn't that scared. Hedwig refused to land on his arm as he entered, but Harry quickly tied the letter to her leg, and released her to find Padfoot.

She'd been gone five minutes, Harry still standing, fuming, at the slots to leave, when he realized that he had not included his colour in the letter, or the skin. Harry turned away from the window and slumped to the ground, no longer looking at anything, and refusing to acknowledge that mistake.

He was still sitting at the juncture of floor and wall below a window, when Susan Bones came in and glanced down at him curiously. She crouched beside him, and had remained there for several minutes, before Harry finally glanced over at her. She gave him a bland look.

"Aren't you concerned about the owl-droppings that may affix themselves to your robes?"

"Cleaning charms." Harry snapped. He refused to look at her, afraid once more. Scared of her seeing the fear and shame on his face. The combination almost made him laugh. He was scared she'd see he was scared. How he managed to be so screwed up escaped him, but it built in his mouth like a bubble ready to pop at the slightest change.

"Ahh, yes. Those. Mr. Rich-Man."

Harry looked over at her quickly, not sure if he should be offended at her slur against his family money. Her expression was still stoically bland, and Harry cursed his curiosity. He stood quickly, and moved away from the window, studiously checking over his robes and cleaning the few spots with quick charms. Susan caught a few spots as well, and smiled as she whistled down a tawny owl to her.

"I was just coming up to send a letter to my aunt. Who were you sending a letter to?"

"My family." Harry shrugged. Susan may have been a friend, but that book and what he was trying to figure out were still illegal, especially at his age. Only adults could register as animagi, so it was understood you weren't supposed to try until then either. That particular book was auror-specific. Small truths worked best, ones that simply held a wide gap in their true spectrum, a phrase that was a lesson from Alan at his clearest. The phrase worked, and Susan nodded warmly. Harry looked her over for a moment, and then bowed playfully, kissing her hand before walking out without a word. Hopefully she'd remember the courtesy now, rather than the state he was in when she'd arrived.

Besides, it never hurt to be polite to a pretty girl.

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It was only three days before Harry wandered to the library with Alan, and he smiled to find him seated where he normally was. Although he'd been in a good mood so far, he hadn't been very chatty. Harry sat, and pulled out the book but before he'd even completed it, Alan glanced at him sidelong, and growled,

"Potter, what the Hell are you doing invading my space?"

Harry blinked, and frowned back. "The library's fair space, Prince. My apologies if I take up your studying room, but the air is lovely and the space plentiful. I think there's plenty room more for another book." Harry moderated his tone towards the end, but Alan slammed his book shut, and slapped his feet back to the ground.

"Fine then. I'll move." He curtly announced.

Harry shook his head and slipped the book back inside his bag, standing and leaving on his own to a table alongside the next shelves. Parting, he sighed. "No, no, enjoy your dark little corner. I need one that's a tad lighter for my work, snake." Either Alan was pissed at him for whatever reason, or someone had been spying on him. Sitting down, Harry pulled his homework out, and began to work on his History of Magic essay. A half-hour later, Alan strolled over and put his hands firmly on the table.

"Potter. I think we need to talk."

He stood immediately thereafter, and Harry glared at him, trailing his strolling out and then slamming his books into his bag with unnecessary force before walking back over. He felt himself pass through a ward, and, seeing Alan standing there, arms akimbo and still looking fierce, Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and met his look with a sullen one of his own.

"Well?" Harry offered.

Alan ran his fingers through his hair in annoyance, silently mouthing words Harry couldn't catch. He looked firmly back at him and spoke. "I'm being watched by Moody; he's already searched the Slytherin dorms and my father's rooms. Chances are he'll be doing a cursory look through the other dorms, but I almost lost my stores of potion supplies; I had to entrust them to Green on the drop of a hat to keep them, along with several books illegal here that aren't in America." Alan gave him a long look, and Harry rolled his eyes and shifted his weight forward.

"Oh, so that's why you're being so antagonistic right now?" Harry shifted backwards with a mocking smile. "Gee, I thought it was just because you loved me."

Alan gave him a disgusted and amused look. "You wish."

"Well, let me know when we can talk again. We could always have another fly-by." Harry laughed, and Alan sat down primly.

"That would be ridiculous. Only if I can try hexing you off your broom. Don't worry; I know all the counters and we can have everybody glaring at us or try it at night with Andrew and Koreol keeping watch."

Harry turned around. "Night, perhaps. You can learn to shoot a moving target in the dark. So," Harry spun once more and stalked back to the table, getting into Alan's face, "any chance you could work out this?" Harry slid the book on animagi over to Alan and gave him a fierce look. He'd pulled it from his bag with sleight of hand, and offered it over. "Feel free to glamour it as you will. I need the potion to figure out more of what I'm potentially becoming. You can use it for your own benefit as well. Just get it back to me, would you? Before school ends?" Harry subtly passed the bottle of herbs under the table, tossing it into Alan's lap.

Alan glared back at him, and gently pushed him away. "I'll get you a messenger for it later. Scram."

Harry stood, jerking his chin up arrogantly, and then stormed out of the library, past the wards. He'd entered the main section when Moody clumped out of the shelves to eye him.

"You alright there, Harry?"

Harry jumped slightly, and shrugged. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Saw you and Prince arguing. What was the problem?"

"Oh," Harry fidgeted and looked away shortly. "Well, I was just ... you know. It was nothing."

"That was a pretty argument there. You walked in there pretty confident." Both Moody's eyes focused on Harry at once, and Harry fidgeted for several moments. The longer he lasted, the more Moody would believe him when ...

"Potter?"

"I just wanted to take that corner, is all." Harry huffed awkwardly, not looking at Moody. "I like the spot, there's some good books around but he's always sitting there. You know." Harry fidgeted again, without prompting. Moody's stare was very disconcerting. "He told me off for it, and a few other things. Insisted I return a book I'd pulled out of there earlier; I was done with it. I'm fine, really. I think he guessed you were watching." Harry offered. Moody grunted.

"Yeah, he did. Warded the corner when he dragged you in, he did. Secretive little runt. Not surprising, considering, but still secretive. Don't like him, and don't like Geoffrey Alfaerus either. Patronising foreigner." Moody growled. "See you in class, then, Harry." Moody stumped off, still glaring at the air and terrifying several third years that wandered in. Harry pointedly continued his stroll back out of the library, and huffed as he remembered that Neville was still pissed at him. Harry didn't want to face that, so he quickened his pace and stormed into the dorms. Ditching his bag in his trunk, Harry fished out his Firebolt and went back downstairs. Flying would help him think; he hadn't done so in too long. Maybe he could forget his fears up there in a way he'd not managed for a long while.

A/N: I feel the love. Thank you to everyone who reviewed. Please tell me what you think of this one as well? Two more weeks again!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-two

Harry got a letter back in two days later, with Sirius exclaiming excitedly about his discovery and their attempts. It was a Hogsmeade weekend, but Harry was still resenting Neville and Neville was not unaware of the hostility from Harry in turn, so they were both avoiding each other and anyone else. Alan was occupied talking with Blaise and nipping into the small apothecary. Finally, frustrated and feeling rather alone, Harry stuffed the already wrinkled parchment letter into his pocket and stalked up to the school.

The atmosphere of the empty school was surprisingly welcoming, and Harry felt a smile twist its way onto his face despite his dark mood. Hogwarts was as welcoming as his own home, even without the bustle and chatter of other students surrounding him.

The walk up to Gryffindor tower was as familiar as the way to his room back home, and he walked it without really seeing where he was going or what was there. Once he was up there, however, he spoke the password and stopped when the door opened. McGonagall was standing in the common room keeping an eye on many nervous-looking first and second years, and a smattering of older students, several of whom looked nervous or disgruntled. Harry stepped in, and Lee Jordan, the Weasley twins' friend, waved him over.

"Hey Harry, what brought you back early?" Harry gave him a silent look and raised one eyebrow. Lee looked disappointed, but waved it off and gave a wry smile. "Moody's decided to do a dorm search, paranoid old auror. He'll be having a few words with some students as they come back. He's searching up through the dorms, I think he's already been through yours. He comes down to tell McGonagall if he's got a question or something. You alright there?"

Harry wasn't alright, but he nodded quietly anyways and carefully blanched his face. There were several things in his stuff he didn't want found and while he doubted Moody would invade a journal or anything, he would certainly look at several of Harry's items with suspicion. Quite a few were of questionable legality for someone underage, and the rest ... simply weren't on the right side of things.

Most he had gotten from his father and were against ministry approval, but a few he'd gotten for himself recently, and a few were gifts from Alan and those were not legal. Well, at least they weren't in Britain. Most were in America, one of the reasons he'd felt safe having them; the ability to claim ignorance. He just hoped Moody would question him about them in private ...

He was waiting long enough that he joined a game of Exploding Snap in the common room, with several others who spent just as much time staring at the stairs as he did. Finally, Moody clumped back down and turned to McGonagall, his magical eye scanning the room.

"All clear, Minerva. I'll need to speak with several students as they get back. Potter!" Harry jumped to hear his name growled. "Come with me."

Harry stood and left in Moody's wake, tailing him to a nearby deserted classroom. McGonagall followed as well, and Moody frowned, and she retreated with a bored look before he warded the room. Apparently she wasn't that concerned about James Potter's son, nor surprised that he had in and warded, Moody glanced around, and nodded.

"Good of you to be there, Potter. You had a few things I wanted to see if your father had given you or not. Might as well start; you'd probably make the biggest fuss anyways."

Harry blinked, but kept his face carefully blank, fidgeting only slightly in place. Moody summoned a desk over and put several books on it, along with his invisibility cloak, and a small necklace. Lastly, he held up a pale wand only a few shades darker than his holly wand. Harry blushed slightly, and turned aside.

"A second wand." Moody growled.

"It was a bit of an accident, ..." Harry allowed, but he ducked his head as Moody glared. "It was my father. He let me keep it."

Moody chuckled lowly and gently laid the wand next to the rest of the items. "You also have this." Moody fingered the necklace, examining

it with his fake eye as he pinned Harry with his real one. “I’d like to make sure you know what all you have. This tournament is rubbing me wrong, boy. And while I doubt you’ve got much to do with it, I’m an auror. And as such … I’d like to know where you got each of these.”

Harry swallowed. Moody might let him keep them if he played this right. “Two of the books are from my parents, and the other two … I ordered them from a catalogue sitting around the library that I found.” A catalogue Alan had sent him over the summer to mark what he wanted, and then he’d bought him two of the books he’d indicated. Harry had sent him a calibre in return; one like the necklace Moody still held that confused the ministry Trace on underage wizards, blocking small, simple spells. That had been a hurdle to find. And how he’d get it back from Moody …

“You aware these books are illegal over here?” Moody tapped the two American books and Harry rapidly shook his head. Moody grunted, looked over the items and smiled crookedly. “Well, you didn’t do anything to the tournament with any of this, Potter.” Moody picked it up, and tapped the necklace Harry had bought. It looked something like the necklace his parents had bought for him, to warn them if he was in danger, a small old-fashioned looking key but the calibre was smaller, and rougher. He then looked Harry over and then handed it back to him. “I must have been mistaken about this. I thought you kept your parents’ necklace on all the time.”

Moody’s expression belied the phrase, but Harry didn’t even consider bringing it up. He just smiled, thanked heaven he’d tucked that necklace under his shirt, and pulled the calibre on. Moody turned away to step out, and Harry grabbed his books, second wand, and his cloak, and quickly disillusioning the spines of the books. Moody paused just outside the door, and looked at him.

“Longbottom has much the same things in his trunk. You better not be caught with those anytime in the rest of the year.”

Harry nodded quickly and returned to the dorms, accepting the warning easily. That was not something he really wanted to run into anytime soon, and he got through the common room with a strained

smile and a quick step. He was additionally grateful that Alan had had the animagus book. He didn't want Moody to know about that as well.

The thought made him wonder if Moody had ever attempted to become an animagus, but he let it go after a moment and moved his books back into his trunk, removing the calibre and putting it in the small pocket in the bottom corner with Alan's letters, where he should have put it to begin with. He didn't think Moody had found that pocket; there was no magic hiding it and nothing magical inside. Harry stood and pulled his parent's necklace from under his shirt and letting it dangle like the calibre had. Looking down at the slightly helter-skelter level to his clothes Harry frowned, and shook his head, setting to reorganizing it. He supposed Moody's search was valid, and, as Alan's friend, he could appreciate the thought, but he greatly doubted Moody had found anything worth the search, and had done nothing more than make the children wary. Where the value in the effort was, Harry didn't know. He wasn't so sure he cared, either. Dumbledore was just being placating with this, he was sure of it.

The thought put a frown on his face. Irritably, Harry pulled one of the books he'd ordered from America out and settled back into his bed to read, eyeing the diagrams with care. It was a karate book, with moving illustrations and small additional considerations of fighting in a robe (inadvisable; quick transfiguration was recommended) to manoeuvring on a broom and where the put your wand so as not to lose or break it. Not the most useful thing he'd ever indulged in, but satisfying in a strange way. It also passed the time until he got to listen to Ron and Neville come in and complain about the messes in their trunks.

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By the time the weekend came around, it appeared that Neville had forgotten to be annoyed with Harry, and they were talking again. Their camaraderie, however, had no effect on the more recent news.

During dinnertime, just adjacent to their conversation, Lavender Brown gasped.

"Oh, no way! Parvati, look at this! You have to read this!"

Harry and his friends all stared at her until they saw the magazine was Witch Weekly. Hermione snorted.

"For crying out loud, she really could keep it down. Honestly, fashion tips are not that important."

Harry laughed quietly, and returned to eating, but eating was rather suddenly postponed when Melanie came up and waved a folded magazine between them and then threw it at Neville. Neville caught it with a frown.

"Melanie, we're eating ..." He began.

Melanie looked distraught. "Neville, read that article! I can't believe – I hope that woman rots somewhere dark and dank! She can't print stuff like that, can she?"

"Melanie." Harry snapped. "What is it?"

"Rita Skeeter wrote an article about Prince, saying his mother was a – a – scarlet woman." Melanie whispered the taboo label, and then shifted, awkward. "Just ... can you get the magazine back to me afterwards? Romilda is going to want it back."

Harry wasn't listening anymore. He'd pulled the magazine from Neville the moment Melanie said it was about Alan, and held it so that he and Neville could both read it across the table. He could tell people were reading it everywhere; the noise in the Hall had risen to a dull roar, but his attention was fixed on the printed vitriol before him.

THE PRINCE OF KNOCKTURN ALLEY

By Rita Skeeter

Finding our established school represented by the dark horse Alan Prince of Slytherin, this reporter sought to shed some light on his shadowed origins. The search brought me to the dark corners of the dubious Knockturn Alley, and the small room of an infamous young squib, Amber Callough. Amber Callough was one of the last of an old

and failing pureblood line, with a single sister now living in America, married into the most ignominious Alfaerus line, currently under suspicion for their copious use of force at the recent Quidditch World Cup. However, Amber herself was living in Knockturn Alley by the most dubious of trades: selling herself as a petty prostitute. Apparently, however petty though she was, she was most popular with clients such as Horace Slughorn, Augustus Rookwood, and, more recently, the Hogwarts current Potions master, Severus Snape. Other characters were seen amidst and around her rooms, but time and discretion keep most of the clientele secret still. It is solid fact that she was popular, and she was most certainly not unable to keep herself in more comfort than she indulged in. Purchases are remembered for fine elf-made wine, and potions ingredients possibly for her many lovers.

In the light of Amber's many consorts, Alan's true parentage would be most dubious, but with his recent growth the suspicion falls mostly onto Severus Snape, with their most stunning similarities. Alan is a prodigious student in Potions, and, as seen in the picture captured above, possesses many of Snape's most distinguished characteristics. With grace likely drawn from his mother, Alan Prince would certainly fall into an eligible list for Witch Weekly, despite his having taken the dubious 'Loony' Luna Lovegood to the Yule Ball.

Other concerns in the boy's life are where he grew up for many years, and who raised him. Suspicion lays with an American childhood, most likely in the case of his aunt's family, the aforementioned Alfaerus, prominent purebloods in America. Such speculation is currently next on my list, but most should be watchful that the boy doesn't turn back to his roots.

Above the article, Harry stared at the picture caught of Alan. It clearly wasn't posed – probably one of Creevey's candid shots, sold unexpectedly. However, the Alan in the picture, while unaware at the time of the photo, was now shooting suspicious glances out of the frame from his profile, and awkwardly ducking his head as though he wished he possessed more hair with which to hide his face. Harry, however, was more focused on his indignation at the absolute callousness of Rita's article about Amber. Did she think she could delve into the past with such impunity? If Harry had been less

incensed at her callous treatment of Alan's parentage, he'd be honestly concerned for the woman. The 'ignominious Alfaerus' would not take this lying down.

Harry relinquished the article to Neville and Hermione on the other side of the table, and glanced across the hall. He was unsurprised to find neither Alan nor most of his coterie, and, even less surprised to see Draco sulking amidst his own. However, Harry strongly suspected that this was only the beginning of the damage this article would do.

III

The next morning, Harry went hesitantly down to breakfast, and choked when he chanced a look at the Slytherin hourglass. It was completely empty. It had been riding low ever since Alan had been chosen as the school champion, but Harry had never seen any of the hourglasses absolutely empty this late in the year. A few others were exclaiming at it, and Neville came up beside him and winced.

"Ouch. Snape mustn't be happy."

Harry shook his head carefully, and led the way into the Great Hall. Just inside, however, he paused as he saw Alan, seated in his usual place, with a buffer of his coterie on either side and across from him. They usually were not seated so completely together; normally only Lucille Pupp and Blaise beside him at meals, but now he was surrounded by them on all sides. Alan looked pale, and tense, but that was only visible due to long association with him; his face expressed a deep calm that was completely out of place. There was also something seeming to be missing, but he didn't quite catch it until Draco came strutting into the room. He passed behind Alan and his group; Alan's coterie watched him, several fingering their wands as they rested in their hands. Alan did nothing but focus on eating, and Harry noted that his wand was not in his hands at all. It was surprising, as Alan was very cautious about his own defence. He didn't usually give such trust to his coterie; why he was doing so now escaped Harry completely.

He apparently paused too long in looking, as Neville quickly bumped his shoulder and moved past him towards the Gryffindor table. Harry followed reluctantly, still watching over at Alan where he was stubbornly eating his meal without paying attention to the low conversations going on all around him. The calm of the morning, however, shattered shortly as an owl came in with a burning red letter, landing before Professor Snape. Harry watched it with trepidation, and Severus' look made the smouldering look rather fitting.

The envelope leapt into the air, screaming in a woman's shrill voice.

"You sordid wretch! What a whoremonger, to be teaching our children! Can't even be bothered to keep an eye on your own, letting him grow up with foreigners with no manners, where he lies and cheats his way through life! What miserable, skulking foul talents you pass on, from father to son! Azkaban is too good for you, but I suppose it'll hold fine until you both find your way there! Death Eater scum!"

Ash fell into Severus' plate, but he calmly banished it without his face betraying a thought beyond his disgust. Alan hadn't even twitched at his seat, continuing eating without emotion. An exceptionally brave student called anonymously above the murmur,

"Callous, unfeeling Slytherins!"

Startlingly, Dumbledore answered, "Detention, Mr. Davies. You may join the Slytherins with Filch this evening."

There was a well of silence, and then conversation began slowly once more. Harry felt absent, and hollow, unsure of where to take his feelings now that such a gap had opened. This article was going to make everything absolutely miserable.

Fortunately, the first class of the day was Herbology. Most of the Hufflepuffs were as upset with the utterly sordid nature of the article that the discussion was at a minimum around the supremely pleasant Hufflepuff head of house. Unfortunately, the next class of the day was Care of Magical Creatures, with the Slytherins. Harry was not looking

forward to seeing Alan and Draco in close quarters. Hopefully they'd have gotten their animosity worked out the class before ...

Viewing the scene as Harry came upon the gathered students, Harry felt little hope of it. Blaise, as well as Theodore Nott who normally remained neutral in Slytherin, were both keeping their eyes on Draco, their backs to Alan who was calmly facing front, his wand again nowhere in sight. Hagrid was eyeing them in concern, as Draco kept his eyes on Alan's two defenders, apparently oblivious to the hostile glances coming his way from the girls Daphne and Tracey behind him. Seeing the Gryffindors approaching, Draco smiled maliciously, waiting until they could hear.

"My word, Alan, are you so concerned with your looks you refuse to engage anyone in a fight anymore? Looking to take after your mother's line of work?" Behind Draco, Crabbe and Goyle laughed thickly. "I suppose your looks are a little on the fringe of being unacceptable -"

"Enough!" Hagrid growled. "I don't want to hear another word. You'll leave him alone, if I have ter separate you on purpose."

Harry and the Gryffindors nervously took their positions beside the Slytherins, and, after they'd settled, Harry was surprised to see Alan move and walk in front of them, to stand beside Hermione, as far from the Slytherins as he could, blankly watching Hagrid with deliberate focus. Blaise followed him quickly, along with Daphne. Theodore looked between Draco and Alan, his face tight, and remained where he was, relaxing slightly, once more on the fringe of the 'acceptable' Slytherins, Tracey Davis beside him. Hagrid watched it for a moment, and shrugged, turning back to the crates at his feet, which were full of nifflers.

The lesson turned out to be of a fortunate set up, as Alan purposefully remained sequestered with the Gryffindors, Blaise and Daphne buffering him on either side. A short look from Harry put Dean, Seamus, and the Gryffindor girls aside from Hermione and Sophie Roper opposite them, placing Gryffindors between the three Slytherins and the rest of their housemates. Harry wasn't too sure why none of the Gryffindors were complaining, but he was grateful for

it. There was no excuse for what Rita had written, and he wasn't going to let Draco get his way.

Once the nifflers had dug up all the coins, however, and Ron had gotten his chocolate, Alan could no longer hide among the Gryffindors and rejoined the Slytherins. Harry, Ron, and Hermione paused at the door, mostly at Harry's initiative and watched them walk up. Alan had come to the bottom of the stairs, Draco coming up behind him when Draco glanced at Hermione and called once more,

"Alan, were you looking for customers among the Gryffindors? I thought they were all poor, although Hermione might have money to spare, as a mudblood. You can never tell with them, no galleons or —"

Draco never finished. Alan seemed to stiffen, and then the ugly look Harry had been expecting all day tore across his features, and he darted from his group to deck Malfoy hard across the face. Draco staggered, and Alan paused, stepping back as he struggled to regain his composure. Draco straightened slowly, watching as Alan turned to walk away, and he spat blood at Alan, catching his trousers. Alan turned slowly to regard him, a dangerous look on his face. Draco faked an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have implied you'd lower yourself to fuck mudbloods; you were probably more interested in the Potter wealth, weren't you?"

Harry felt that was a stupid mistake; he mustn't have been paying enough attention to remember that Harry was standing at the top of the stairs. Then again, Alan didn't give Harry much leeway; he stepped forward, and kicked Draco in the face, his face strangely calm in a way it shouldn't have been, not with the anger that had been there before. Landing and balancing himself as Draco sprawled across the grounds, his goons backed off by Alan's coterie where even Theodore lent a hand, Alan regarded him carefully.

"Draco, you were the whole fucking reason I surrendered my wand to my dad. I don't like using brute force, but Merlin, Mary, and Mordred, you really drive a man to drink if you can't shut up for even five minutes. I'll make this short: I am no whore; just because that's all

you can think of as a profession doesn't mean you need to shift it off on me. Stop tossing pointless, repetitive insults, and I won't be forced to hurt you again." Alan turned his head slightly, and heat re-entered his gaze. "So back the Hell off."

Draco watched sullenly as Alan finished, and Alan, satisfied, turned and entered the Hall with a faint nod to McGonagall as she watched him walk by. She had apparently seen everything, and felt no need to speak up, simply eyeing the Slytherins with contempt. Alan's coterie, plus the apparently new addition of Theodore Nott, followed. Pansy simpered and helped Draco stand, bringing him into the doorway. Harry stopped her where she was. Draco looked at him with disgust, an expression that Harry's calm words quickly changed.

"Insinuating that I both buy whores and fuck men in one fell swoop, Draco ... that's an offence I could call you out on." Draco paled. "Stop bringing me and my friends into your stupid rivalries, Draco. Either them or me. I think you've got your hands full fielding Prince's hostility, don't you think? Or is that what Pansy's for? Thinking?" Harry gave him a contemplative look, before shaking his head in a dismissal. "Either way, practice it elsewhere." Harry gave him a falsely warm smile, and then turned and smiled honestly back at Neville where he stood waiting for them just farther inside. Harry walked past him into the Great Hall, and he fell into step beside him with a wry smile.

Neville shook his head solemnly. "I never thought I'd lose out on that much drama not taking Care of Magical Creatures, but, by Merlin, just about everything happens there, doesn't it?"

Harry shook his head. "You have no idea ..."

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Four days later, things had died down to the point that Harry found himself joined at the table in the back corner of the library with a tired looking Alan. Harry frowned; Alan was looking tired far too often this year. Last year, it had mostly been Harry getting tired, with his proclivity for engaging in several activities at once and dealing with a temperamental Hermione with her unwise decision to take too many classes. Of course, picking occasional public fights with Alan hadn't

helped. Now, due to events beyond Alan's control, he was getting worn down. A quiet acknowledgement was all Harry allowed, determined not to press him. Alan, however, didn't need to be pressed.

"This is ridiculous." He said quietly. Harry closed his book and looked over at him. Alan was looking at him, tight lipped. "All from such a stupid article. God, I hope Geoffrey's idea works; that bitch deserves it for fucking this up."

"Geoffrey's pissed at Rita?"

"Merlin, Mary, and Morgan, Harry, all of Salem is pissed at her over that. Even Hogwarts has some moral indignation; else I'd have had far more trouble. So far it's only been a few Gryffs, some Ravenclaws, and Slytherin. And a Hufflepuff or two. But shit, man."

Harry frowned. "The Gryffindors seemed solid enough during Care of Magical Creatures."

Alan gave Harry a small, wry smile. "You didn't see your face then, Potter." He drawled. "Merlin's drawers, you had Draco cowed with that look of righteous fury. I'm pretty sure most of them took it as moral offence, rather than fury for my sake. I ..." Alan's face changed to an incredulous look. "I suppose I should thank you for being a buffer, Monday."

Harry frowned. "I could do no less."

Alan snorted. "Gryffindor."

Shaking his head, Harry dismissed it with a rude gesture, and then puzzled out a question he'd harboured for a time. "McGonagall saw you deck Malfoy and said nothing. Why?"

Harry got another look from Alan that showed his cynical amusement at the situation he was in once more. "McGonagall said nothing because it was all just tit for tat. Draco insulted me; I retaliated. Since Slytherin has no points left to take, and won't have any for the next month, that's moot and Draco's already got detention, alternating

teachers, for the rest of the year. You weren't there; there was half a firefight in the dungeons the evening the article came out, between Draco and I." Alan smiled wryly. "The lack of points is half my fault. I think there's nothing else to do to him. Snape has threatened to start him in on detention for next year, and possibly send a scathing letter home. He doesn't want to do that last though." Alan sighed. "I suppose even that would be a little too cruel."

Harry couldn't help but nod, his mouth dry. He'd overheard Draco receive a dressing down from his father second year, after he'd just lost a Quidditch match to Gryffindor; during which Lucius had struck Draco. Harry didn't want to consider the beatings he was likely subjected to when he did misbehave. Chances are, he'd be in enough trouble as it was. Harry forcibly shook his head, and regarded Alan again.

"You said you'd given up your wand Monday ..."

"I had, with only a minimal prompt from Severus." Alan nodded. "You don't want to know what sort of curses that prevented. All the times I wanted to do something horrible to Draco, I couldn't, and I was glad of it. Beating him up only means he had to see Madam Pomfrey at the end of each day. Rather than waiting seven hours or so for the curse to wear off." Alan gave Harry a dark look he hoped he never had to face for real. "I know a few more curses than you want to experience."

Harry set aside his book, and leaned forward with an inquisitive expression. Alan saw it, and smirked. Harry returned the expression almost perfectly, and Alan laughed. "Fine, I'll tell you about them. Seriously ..."

"Nah, Sirius is at the Ministry right now, Prince."

Alan groaned and threw a wadded paper at him for the bad joke. Harry grinned unrepentantly.

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Things died down slowly, with Draco often showing up at dinner with bruises and limping. Harry watched it with a feeling of immense satisfaction. Saturday, however, Alan showed up in the morning with a skip in his step, and a smile on his face. Harry couldn't imagine why, but he was happy to see it. Unfortunately for him, Neville noticed immediately and simply laughed quietly before sitting down beside him. The others were curious as well, but Harry finally shrugged it off and continued as is. Immediately thereafter, he left and smiled at Neville, egging him into a pick-up game of Quidditch. They made their way out onto the pitch, but were interrupted several minutes later, when Harry felt something coming up behind him as he scouted for the snitch they'd released. He fell immediately into a roll, and someone burst past him, ruffling his hair. Harry growled,

"Watch where you're going! Can't you see we're playing here? You want on the pitch, you ask!"

Above him, the broom halted, and Harry found himself facing a wickedly smirking Alan.

"But Potter, I want a pick-up game myself. I know you don't have a full team, so I only brought equal. Think your associates can match mine?"

Harry looked down, and found that Alan had brought his coterie with him; however, only a few were holding their brooms. They were matched pretty cleanly with his own friends, which Harry strongly suspected was purposeful. He'd only been playing with Ron, Neville, Hermione, Ginny and Melanie; Nanna was pouting in the stands, broomless. While Ron, Ginny and Melanie were easily capable flyers, Keeper and Chasers respectfully, Hermione wasn't much of a Chaser, and Neville was only passable as a Beater. At the time, they'd only been playing with the quaffle, three on two with Harry seeking the snitch for himself, but Alan knew how Harry saw their potential for a full team. In turn, Alan's team was equally mixed in talent. Alan was quite equal to Harry as a seeker, but Salvador Hopkins, a fifth year, and Tracey Davis of their year were not into Quidditch, simply passable flyers. However, Lucille and Daphne more than made up for Tracey's mediocrity as a Chaser, and Blaise was decent at beating. It made the field pretty level, and since only Alan and Harry were

actually on the Quidditch teams, even with Ron as a reserve after Harry and Neville had bullied him into trying out, there was little to complain about if the parties were trusted. Harry knew Alan wouldn't play dirty - he'd play damn hard, but not dirty.

"Mercilessly, Alan. You think you're willing to play that hard on a free day?"

"Why not? Or is the Gryffindor scared?"

Harry straightened his broom and came level with Alan. "Scared of you, Alan? Hardly." Harry waved Madam Hooch over from where she was watching them with her hawk-like gaze, and she came with a frown. Gryffindor and Slytherin on the pitch together, even for a free game, wasn't an ideal situation.

"You two having problems?" She asked, brusquely.

"No." Harry answered easily. "We've agreed to a pick-up match, only one bludger because we've only got one beater each."

Madam Hooch looked between them carefully, and Alan merely nodded, looking superior. Harry had to fight to keep from laughing. Finally, Madam Hooch sighed. "Alright. Back to the ground, then, and I'll start you off."

Harry and Alan followed her down, and quickly Harry's friends gathered behind him with varying expressions. Neville looked curious; most of the others were irritated and curious, but they quickly turned to Hooch.

"Alright, Mr. Potter and Mr. Prince have agreed upon a match. It's a friendly match, so I expect clean play. Are all of you agreed to it?"

There was a chorus of nods from Alan's, and Harry looked between his friends, watching them exchange glances. Neville mostly just shrugged, and Ron had somehow managed to pick out Alan's Keeper and made a staring contest of it. Salvador glared back, and Ron fidgeted before nodding firmly. Salvador grinned, teeth white against his dark skin. Out of the stands, however, Nanna came running.

"I wanna play, Harry!"

Harry eyed her carefully, and then shook his head. "Nanna, you're first, too small, and second, you have no broom."

Nanna continued over, and planted her feet before Harry and scowled up at him. "First off, I'm bigger than you were when you came here and secondly, I can easily borrow one of the twin's brooms. Then you can whoop these Snakes with two bludgers."

Neville paled at that suggestion, but shrugged when Harry eyed him. They both knew Nanna was both an excellent flier and an enthusiastic beater. However, even being taller than Harry at that age, she was still quite small and with Neville as the other beater, she'd be foremost in running interference; Neville played beater because he wanted a beater's bat if he was going to be on the pitch. Alan cleared his throat across from them, and Harry almost felt relief.

"Well, we can't have uneven teams and I'm not sure if I have another player ..."

"I can play." Theodore offered. Both teams looked over at him; Alan raised his eyebrows. "Chaser, so Tracey could move to beater. I'm not excellent, but against them I think I can handle it." He gave Harry and his a superior look; Harry didn't bother responding. Ginny could glare just fine. Harry looked at Alan, and then Tracey, who now seemed to be as pleased with the set up as Neville was. Maybe she was nervous about the bludgers too. Harry finally tried his last hope, looking beseechingly to madam Hooch. However, she wasn't much help.

"First years can borrow brooms if they desire to join in on a free game. Your parents never sent a letter denying that, Mr. Potter." She finished dryly. "It's your call." She gave the Slytherins another suspicious look.

Harry sighed in defeat, and then straightened. Nanna was a better beater than Neville was, really. It was just ... his little sister. But

Neville and Ron's little sisters were playing too, and she'd never give him any peace.

"Accio Fred's broom." Harry offered. The shed door bumped open, and the broom danced easily over, coming to a stop when Nanna happily grabbed it and climbed on.

With the teams settled, there was little else to be done. Everyone was quite certain of who was on their teams, so they balanced on either side of the box of Quidditch balls, and waited patiently while students hurried into the stands to watch. Pick-up games between Gryffindor and Slytherin didn't usually get Hooch's permission to occur, so students came from everywhere to see just how violent this game would get. Harry gave Alan his best cold game face, and got one right back. The snitch was already out, and Hooch waited, giving Harry and Alan another stern look before blowing the whistle and starting the game. Harry nearly fell off his broom when a young man's voice called out,

"And they're off, Prince versus Potter on today's pick-up game of the year! The quaffle starts out, and Potter's Miss Longbottom snatches it up to make the run to Prince's goal."

Harry didn't recognize the voice, but he strongly suspected it was one of Prince's coterie. However, it was still a Quidditch game, and Harry was now resting above the game to watch the play go by beneath him. Theodore had the quaffle now and was barrelling down the pitch to Ron, but he nearly lost his grip when Nanna beat a bludger straight across his vision. Taking advantage of his distraction in an unexpected tactical manoeuvre, Hermione skimmed by and batted the quaffle out of his grasp, dropping it into Ginny's waiting arms below. Hermione was forced to dive herself as she nearly ran into Lucille before she could get out of the way. Lucille herself went up and over, showing a sportsmanship unexpected in a Slytherin.

Harry's attention returned to his surroundings when Alan took a fly by on him, rolling away from a bludger shot from Neville. It wasn't exactly well aimed, but for a bludger, that wasn't necessarily a huge requirement. Harry dodged away from it, and it returned to the fray

below, but Alan was now in Harry's area, and Harry took advantage of the moment.

"Interesting choice of game, Prince." Harry called.

Alan looked at him with an unguarded look of amusement, and turned it immediately into a malicious grin. "I felt we needed a Slytherin commentator one of these days. Malcolm has his sights set on edging out Lee Jordan, or at least taking over for him. Think he's any good?" Alan then fell into a dive, Harry copying him. Harry noted that apparently he'd gotten his Firebolt back, as they were completely evenly matched on the plow. A glance ahead put the suspicion of a fake-out in Harry's mind, but he kept up, wanting to see what Alan was really up to. It wasn't long before they were nearing the ground, and Harry watched Alan, knowing there was no snitch, and as soon as he pulled up, Harry arced away to the other side, returning to his careful scanning.

Across from him, Alan hissed and barrel-rolled, a bludger streaming by his face to belt into the ground. Nanna screamed her happiness, and turned to intercept the bludger going to Melanie. Belting it upset her flying almost every time she connected, but it was a simple matter to her to correct or use the change and to keep on going. The bludger she'd hit into the ground finally pulled itself out, and rejoined by fray, but by then Harry was already skirting the pitch to return to his high vantage. Going up put him past Malcolm where he was commentating.

"And the seekers, team captains both, try a fake-out that fails rather anti-climatically. Miss Potter beats a bludger, throwing Prince off course, and Potter picks up and takes back to the skies. We're sitting at forty-twenty, Potter's leading but we've got Pupp at the goalposts against Weasley, shoot ... Weasley makes another save, leaving the score in place, and sending the quaffle to Miss Weasley."

The save brought a grand cheer from one of the stands, where a large number of students had gathered to watch the impromptu game. The glance showed him a spark of gold, and Harry leaned into his broom to shoot to the spot. Alan, above him, paused and then followed, and Harry put on an extra burst of speed, pressed almost

flat against his broom. If Alan was going for it, it really was the snitch
...

Behind him, Neville yelled in panic, and Harry gripped tight and gave a swift roll without even really thinking about it. Something grazed his fingers and he came up on the other side, glimpsing a bludger growing distant and hearing faint cursing from behind him. He smiled even as his eyes rooted on the hovering snitch once more. Neville must be having a heart attack.

Watching the snitch, however, gave him a good sense that Alan was closer, and, with equal brooms, he was most definitely going to get there first. The thought almost distressed him, but he pushed it aside. He could lose to Alan, but he shouldn't look that calm. Harry ground his teeth, and tried to work just another inch of speed from his broom – and Alan was forced to spin out of his dive as a bludger sped to where he'd just rested. Harry gained the space he needed; Alan swore behind him, and Harry reached to find the snitch gone over his head flying out of reach –

And into Alan's swift grasp.

Harry snarled as Alan grabbed it, surprised at the change, but the Slytherin turned it into a superior grin, and turned to fly back to the pitch, hand held triumphantly over his head. Harry dropped low to make it back to the pitch and his own team, upset at the loss, but not overly so. Neville looked simply grateful to be out of the air, and away from the bludgers, but Nanna looked disheartened alongside Melanie. Still in the air, Alan and his coterie were making quite a ruckus, and Hooch was watching them where they stood with a distracted look. Harry supposed she was surprised at the clean game; not a single of Alan's had tried to make a foul; in fact, they'd avoided them completely. There hadn't been a single foul at all. It must have been a school record, or something.

Harry turned back to Nanna and put his hand on her shoulder, smiling down at her, pleased for a moment that he still could, that she was shorter than him though not by much. "It's alright Nanna; you did good. That was your bludger that knocked him off his path, right?" She nodded sullenly. "I almost had it because of that; he was going to

beat me there. He only caught it because it reversed direction right at him."

Nanna paused, and then nodded once more. Behind him, Harry heard the Slytherins land, and turned to watch them carefully. Alan calmly walked back to him and stopped midway between their teams. Harry pulled away and went to meet him, stopping with a fair space between them. Alan smiled wryly and mockingly bowed.

"A very well played game, Potter. Very well played game. I thank you for allowing it, and wish you better luck next year when we're playing for real."

"You only caught the snitch due to chance, Prince." Harry growled. "I don't know why you look so happy; your team was losing." It was a round-a-bout way to ask what had him grinning like a Cheshire cat. Alan, however, chose not to answer in any discernable form.

"I think beating the infamous 'youngest seeker in a century' is reason enough." He relinquished the snitch to madam Hooch as she walked up, and then turned his back easily and went off to join his own team, and the rest of his coterie. Harry growled, and went back to the others. Alan's answer was pointless; he couldn't see what on earth he'd meant with it. While the frustration was useful in keeping up appearances, it didn't make Harry feel that much better.

Silently, Harry led the others to putting up their brooms and heading back inside. His frown had eased quickly as the others spoke warmly of the enjoyable match; Hermione was feeling several times more confident about her ability to fly, and Nanna was ecstatic at the praise she was receiving for her beating skills. Melanie and Ginny were overflowing with praise, and Ron was simply happy to practice. Harry supposed he'd personally enjoyed it as well. Playing against Alan was a real challenge, one he didn't come across often. Enigmatic habits, or not, it was still true fun.

A/N: Thank you for so many reviews, will I be graced with more for this chapter as well? I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter Twenty-three

"Harry, did you hear that? Did you hear? The twins are so happy; they said I'm a shoo-in for a reserve, and that I'm getting on the team once they're all graduated!"

Nanna was bouncing with excitement in the common room, repeating once again the news Harry had now heard four times over since the pick-up game, yesterday. The regular Quidditch team had joined the stands as soon as it had gotten around that a pick-up game was going on, and had been surprised to see it had turned into an all-out match, Harry versus Prince. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie, along with the twins, had been only too happy to give out critiques afterwards, praising Nanna and Ron's skill, and laughing at Neville's lack thereof. Neville, however, was already comfortable with the fact that Nanna was a better flyer, and a better beater than he, so he was laughing with the rest at his dismal play.

However, it was now the day after, and it was breakfast. Strangely enough, Alan's good mood had lasted and Snape also seemed far cheerier than he had been before. Harry sat down with the rest of his friends, still smiling from the high of the game the day before. It was truly amazing what a good game of Quidditch could do to the lion house's general attitude, even if they lost, so long as it was fair.

Shortly thereafter, however, the post came. Harry looked for his parent's letter. One of them wrote him almost every week, and while the news was usually very little, it was a nice thing to know his mother missed him, and his dad was happy for the grades he heard about from Dumbledore, since Harry wasn't much of a writer. The letter arrived with Stag, written in his father's hand, and Harry tucked it away, just before Hermione swore, sounding more startled than upset.

"Hermione, what the Hell?" Neville asked quickly. He looked at the back of the paper she held, and Hermione quickly lowered it with wide eyes. Harry glanced over and found the article that had taken Hermione's attention. It was the Headline of the day, and Harry suddenly understood exactly why Alan was so pleased.

RITA SKEETER: DEAD BY POISON

Hermione stared between them fiercely. "It says she was found in a hotel by the cleaning woman. She'd been out interviewing someone for another article, but they can't find whom she was interviewing, and she'd not taken down a name. The person had apparently wanted to remain anonymous. She'd been poisoned pretty simply, but they don't say with what..."

Harry blinked, and held back his own confusion of what the feel – she was dead, murdered, but she bloody well deserved it – and shook his head. "Maybe my dad included something."

Neville watched Harry flip open the letter, but a quick perusal showed that while his dad had mentioned it, he hadn't gone into detail; apparently it was a serious investigation. However, James did mention that he wasn't too sorry she was dead; he'd heard about the article, and while he wasn't surprised Severus had visited a whore, that wasn't something James really wanted to know about him, and he wasn't low enough to use that against him.

Harry sighed; that line, read: Lily had lit into him and forbidden him to say anything about it.

Around them, the kids receiving the Daily Prophet were sharing out the news, to various reactions from concern, to joy, to dismay and incredulity. There seemed to be few who were worried about what was going on, and more that were amused and indifferent than Harry had really expected. Then again, it was Rita Skeeter.

A look at the head table proved fruitful. Snape was eyeing the paper with appreciation; McGonagall seemed to be doing the same. In fact, most of the teachers looked pleased. Hagrid was downright cheerful. Dumbledore looked mildly solemn, and Harry found him turning between looking at Snape, and looking out at the Slytherin table. Harry looked; Alan was sitting happily amidst his gathered coterie, which now included Theodore Nott, and he was apparently deep in conversation, a conversation that involved seemingly incredulous laughter. Harry couldn't help but smile. He was going to have to ask Alan about this later on.

Harry folded up his letter and slipped it back into his pocket, not noticing Neville's once more curious stare at his abrupt change in mood.

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Conveniently, Harry found free time shortly before dinner that same day, and made his way into the library. He was mildly disappointed that Alan wasn't there, but the secluded corner was very good for studying, and Professor Moody had set a fairly difficult essay about Hexes that Harry did need to work on. The corner had several books he was quite fond of, and he pulled them out in short order, losing himself in his work. He felt more than heard Alan join him after a time, but it wasn't until he heard Alan make a pleased sound that he looked up. Alan was in the middle of a stretch, accentuating the inch of height Alan currently had on Harry, or ... that was probably his irritation talking. If his gangly limbs were any indication, Alan was still growing as well.

"You see the paper, Harry?" Alan asked, relaxing into a warm smile.

Harry nodded shortly. "Got a letter from my dad, too, but he didn't have much to add."

"He wouldn't." Alan returned. "They're probably scared and confused." He was still smiling incessantly, hiding none of his current pleasure. Harry finally put down the books and leaned forward on top of them, staring intently at Alan.

"So ... what did happen? Did you get the news of this yesterday; is that why you were so happy?" The words were a careful hiss; they would not want this conversation overheard. They were discussing murder.

Alan smiled thinly back, and gathered his books. He answered without looking at Harry. "I think Myrtle's feeling a tad ignored; maybe we should visit her."

Harry blinked at the answer, and then waited until Alan had left before pulling his things together. He hadn't expected that, but this wouldn't

really be a conversation they'd want overheard, and Alan's parseltongue wasn't common knowledge, unlike Harry's. Even without someone understanding, it would be suspicious of them and it would be better to not even be seen talking in this case. Thus, the Chamber of Secrets.

Heading to the Chamber of Secrets wasn't unprecedented for them. Since second year, it had been cleaned up, the basilisk removed by two Potions Masters, Snape and Green who had been absolutely over the moon with joy at the bounty of extremely rare ingredients, as well as the previously shed skin. The floor had been scoured of bones and muck when the curse-breakers went through, and then left alone once third year rolled around and everything was dealt with. However, Alan and Harry had returned to the Chamber four times since then, mainly for conversations that neither wanted overheard. Alan had disclosed many of his personal secrets to Harry there, and while Rita's fate wasn't anywhere near as important, murder is still not something to be discussed in public.

Harry slipped into the bathroom, as the coast was clear, and quickly went to the sink, waving at Myrtle and sliding down as she blushed silver and ducked back inside her stall. A few conversations, and greeting her as they went by had secured their alibis of having never entered the bathroom at all, and Harry confidently disappeared down the slide. The pipe was clean; Snape had thrown a royal fit at the mess it left on his robes when he'd gone down to fetch the basilisk, even with the fact that nearly a dozen people had gone down before him, picking up the worst. As it was, Harry hit the bottom still as clean as he had entered, and he found Alan admiring the cut of the walls, which were clean. With both American and British curse-breakers in on the scouring of the place for traps and other fun things, the place had ended up far cleaner than it ever would have been otherwise as each side tried to outdo the other. Add a professional sense of competition to national pride and one gets a very thorough job done. Harry and Alan both greatly appreciated it.

Alan turned as Harry bumped out of the pipe, and then smiled before glancing at the tunnel once more, hissing quietly to close the tunnel at the top. Harry bowed to Alan as he turned once more, and Alan laughed quietly, leading him further along to the next door. Harry fell

into step with him, and followed in silence. The tunnel may have been long, but Harry felt no need to speak up and fill the silence, and not a word was exchanged before they passed the second door, which Harry opened and left as they entered the large chamber beyond. Another hissed command, and the torches on the tall pillars lit, revealing the precise walls, and the lifelike snakes carved around each pillar. Halfway down, a long table and several chairs were arranged, a leftover from the summer of second year when the chambers were being combed over in minute detail. Alan pulled out a chair at one end, and Harry sank down across from him, leaning onto his elbow as he waited for Alan to speak up.

"It was Lucille." He said with clear relish. "Aunt Lucille, polyjuiced as Ginger, had the absolute balls to tell Rita she wanted to share some dirt on her 'whore of a sister' and Rita snapped hook, line, and sinker. Lucille told her to keep it anonymous, and that she'd meet her at a muggle hotel where Lucille booked in with a bit of grease to keep her stay discrete, and with Rita not keeping any records of who she was, she brought her in for Belladonna tea, and cheese with yew skewers. Merlin, Mary and Morgan, I couldn't believe the bitch fell for that, but she's good and dead now."

Harry stared for a long moment, and shook his head slowly. "Rita fell for that?"

Alan laughed. "As I said, hook, line, and sinker. I don't know which got past her, but it did and she fell over clean dead once the poison kicked in, and Lucille was out of that hotel with absolute glee after they finished that first interview. Rita had just lapped it all up, didn't suspect a thing or didn't care to guard against a plant poison. Maybe she's only ever looked for magic."

"And now she's dead."

"Yeah." Alan gave Harry a long look, and sighed. "Won't take back that horrid smear, but she was a bitch about everything as it was. You feel sorry for her?"

"Well, she did die." Harry pointed out dryly. "That's not usually a cause for celebration, bitchy person or not. I'm glad she won't be

writing anymore articles about you and yours, and she wouldn't have stopped even for blackmail, but ...”

“She's dead, and you're half-Gryffindor.” Alan finished. “Fair enough.”

Harry watched Alan silently for a long moment, and then merely nodded. Alan gave him a small smile in return, and tilted his head to the side with a curious look. Harry felt immediately suspicious, and raised his eyebrow.

“Harry ... Do you know anything about Occlumency?”

“Occlumency?” Harry repeated. “Not really, no. What is it?”

“Opposite of Legilimency,” Alan began; Harry suppressed a smile. Alan sounded like Hermione when he got that tone of voice. Alan noticed Harry's change of expression, and frowned even as he continued, his tone unchanged, “Occlumency is protecting one's mind from outside invasion, usually through the use of Legilimency, but it's also useful in fooling truth potions and spells into thinking you don't know the answer, or believe in a false one. It's fairly complicated, but chances are you should learn it, especially with all that you know.”

“Ah.” Harry nodded quickly. He really did know more than he should.
“You know it?”

“And Legilimency.” Alan nodded. “Care to learn?”

“Definitely. Not only for your secrets, but for mine too. What do I need to do?”

Alan, however, shook his head and checked his watch. “Not now. It's time-consuming, and complex and we've got dinner in less than a half-hour. We'd need a few hours at a time to go over it. I should get you a book ... I'll have to ask Geoffrey for one so ... maybe about Easter. I should have the Animagus potion done then, too.”

Harry nodded and grabbed his bag. “Well then, we'll check that out once things come around.” Alan smiled up at him, and Harry

shrugged, shouldering his pack and leaving Alan to grab his own bag and follow on the way out of the Chamber.

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Once Harry was crawling into bed that evening, Neville stopped and sat beside him on his bed. Harry looked up from his book with a frown, and found Neville holding a blank piece of new, folded parchment that Harry knew to be the revamped Marauders Map. His expression was completely flat, and Harry felt a thrill of foreboding.

"Harry, the Chamber of Secrets is accessed through Myrtle's bathroom, right?"

Hiding a desire to swallow, Harry nodded slowly. Neville didn't even look at him, staring blankly at the parchment as though it was not currently dormant. Finally, he looked over at Harry, his expression still flat,

"The Chamber doesn't show up on the map, you know."

He stood without talking once more, and crawled into his own bed. Harry felt as though his mouth had dried out in one fell swoop. Neville knew. Without a shadow of a doubt, Neville knew about his friendship with Alan. And chances are, he knew exactly where Harry and Alan always met in the library, because of the map. Harry crawled onto his bed and drew the curtains, laying back onto his pillows and staring at the canopy, calming his pounding heart. He was overreacting. Neville wouldn't do anything; he'd suspected since second year, Harry was sure of it, and while he probably lost that suspicion third year, everything was erupting around them in fourth, driving Alan spare and making Harry act like the Gryffindor he was to support him. Neville would have been a fool to not notice. And Harry was being a fool worrying himself that Neville knew. Neville would do nothing.

Harry rolled over, punching his pillow lightly to make it more comfortable and swallowing back the lump in his throat. Neville would do nothing to ruin it, but he didn't seem to approve. And Harry didn't want his brother to dislike his best friend. Maybe he should see about introducing them better. Maybe ...

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The next month was fairly uneventful. Alan handed Harry a book on Occlumency two weeks after they'd discussed it, telling him to practice the meditating described each night, and told him plainly that come Easter, they'd be able to finish the first step of the animagi. When Neville mentioned to Harry that he wanted to see the animagi book again, to move on in his own investigations, Harry broached a quiet question of whether Neville wanted to know a bit more about Alan. Although ... he was a lot less coherent in asking than he wanted to be. Neville watched Harry a moment, and then shrugged. He didn't mind either way. Cautiously, Harry shared with Neville the book on Occlumency – Alan had given it to him, to keep, since he already owned a copy himself – and Neville was a lot more interested, even if the reason was mostly unrelated to Alan. Harry didn't see the book for a week, which made it fortunate that the exercises he was currently working on were very simple.

Two days into Easter holidays, Neville came up from the library with a small note in hand, and he passed it to Harry with a querulous look, sitting beside him with a frown. Harry blinked, looking up from his Defence book and taking it with a small frown of his own. Neville hefted the book he was holding quietly, and Harry gave him a look. Neville tapped the cover with his wand, and the textbook on Charms became the Occlumency book for a moment. Harry gave a soft 'o' and then flipped open the note. Inside, in Alan's hand, was a note asking Harry to come see him in the Chamber, and, if he wanted, to bring Neville. Alan would be bringing Blaise and Daphne – the two of his coterie Harry knew Alan had let in on his association with Harry. Harry felt a twinge of nerves – he didn't want to see Daphne, but he wanted to finish the animagi work, and start his Occlumency. It made sense to bring their friends – chances are, Alan's coterie wanted to check out animagi, and all of them learning Occlumency was practical. It also made questions of their whereabouts less likely than if they were gone with their friends; it would be assumed they were hanging out in private. For them to disappear alone meant their friends would ask questions, or seek answers much as Neville had done in employing the map. Sighing, Harry gave in. After all, they weren't

breaking rules, per se. Dumbledore had never told Harry to stay out of the Chamber.

Harry folded the note back up with a frown, and nodded shortly to Neville, handing it back and gathering his books. Neville marked his page, closed his and glanced over the note. Frowning, he looked up, and found Harry giving him an impatient look from the common room door. Neville slipped the note into his book, grabbed his own bag and followed him out into the hallway. Jogging shortly, he caught up with Harry, and huffed.

“Explanation, please? Why would Prince give me this to pass on?”

“He saw you were reading the book he’d given me, and apparently presumed that you were as smart as you are.” Harry returned.

Neville growled. “How the Hell did he see the book? It’s under glamour, and even Flitwick hasn’t noticed.”

Harry suppressed a wince. Alan may have overstepped himself there. “It’s … something he can do.”

“How? Why?” Neville demanded.

“That’s for him to answer. I suppose he wasn’t expecting you to have used as strong a glamour as you had, so …” Harry shrugged, ignoring Neville’s hot look. Finally he tossed a frown back at him. “Neville, it’s his secret. He was careless, so you can now throw it in his face once we get into the Chamber.”

“Fine, I will.” Neville added. He then looked carefully back. “Why would Prince be bringing Blaise and Daphne with him?”

“Alibi, probably, and who wouldn’t want to know how to be an Animagus? And Occlumency is useful.”

“He’s sharing our book. You do remember that that particular book is quite illegal?”

"They probably think it's his; he'd be able to get it easy enough. Besides, neither of them would out us."

"You trust them?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. "They're Slytherin. I'm a better ally than an enemy. Simple enough. Same for you."

Neville paused and blinked, before he caught back up with Harry on the landing. Harry grinned a moment. He'd just shocked Neville. He hadn't expected that. Neville was silent for several more minutes, taking them all the way onto the second floor, before he managed to find another question.

"Why am I a better ally than enemy?"

Harry gave Neville a long look, and then smiled and shook his head, leading on to Myrtle's bathroom without answering. Neville followed with a set frown, and remained silent even through Harry smiling and nodding at a blushing Myrtle and opening the chamber, waving Neville to go down first. Neville raised his eyebrows, but went, Harry following shortly. At the bottom, Harry shut the sink once more, and Neville waited until they were heading down the hallway before speaking again.

"Is my name really all that important?"

"Yes," Harry answered, smiling. Of course Neville would figure it out. "It's not everything of it, though."

"I'm not that smart." Neville argued. "You're magically stronger than me, and Hermione keeps getting better grades."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione's a better ally than enemy, too, Neville, muggleborn or not. You've got money, skill, intelligence, and you're already friends with me and several other purebloods. Stop being modest; it doesn't fit in the 'game'."

"The game?" Neville asked. He gave Harry a short askance look, and then shook his head. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Harry laughed, and nodded to the door ahead of them. Neville frowned, and quickly asked,

"Is this going to be like one of those stuffy pureblood parties?"

Harry snorted, and then considered it. "With Blaise and Daphne ... probably. Just ... treat it however's comfortable for you. It's politics, I suppose."

Neville sighed. "Harry ..." He whined. "I hate politics."

Harry just shrugged, allowing himself a small smile as he entered the main room, leading Neville over to the table, where Alan was talking with Blaise and Daphne. Alan shot Harry a small smile, which was more a quirk of his lips than anything, and then turned back to talking quietly with the others. Harry led a mildly frowning Neville over, but when he glanced back he was surprised to find Neville as blank-faced as Blaise, with only a small crease between his brows as a sign of his displeasure. Harry took the seat to Alan's right, Alan having taken the head seat, and Blaise and then Daphne sitting to his left. It was an interesting choice of display that didn't escape the notice of any of those there, as Blaise gave Harry a long look, and Neville shot Harry a curious glance even as he took the seat next to Harry. Harry shook his head, and leaned back, throwing Alan a bright smile, and raising his eyebrows.

"Good evening, Alan."

Alan nodded slowly to Harry, and then threw Neville a polite smile that Neville returned almost perfectly with a faint bow to his head. Alan's smile widened.

"Thanks for coming, Harry. Good evening to you as well, Longbottom. I trust you already know Daphne Greengrass and Blaise Zabini." Neville gave them polite nods in turn, and turned his empty smile back to Alan.

"I'm thankful for the invite, Prince, although I don't understand why you thought to ask."

"I noticed you reading my book. The glamour spell wasn't as good as it could have been, I'm sorry to say."

Harry bit his lip as Neville watched Alan for a moment longer, and he knew it was coming when Neville responded very softly. "You're saying you can see through Favreau's Patent Mantle of Innocuity?"

Alan went very still, and Harry threw Neville an admiring look. He hadn't known Neville had mastered that spell. That was auror level glamour. If you didn't get it right, it didn't take. And Harry doubted Moody would even be able to see through it, or even notice it was there.

"I never said I could see through it," Alan allowed carefully. His pause had been noticed, but he was recovering. Harry wondered what on earth he'd say; this was a damn big slip. "I ... Geoffrey taught me several ways of detecting glamour. Seeing you reading a book under glamour, and considering Harry's closeness with you, I presumed it could be the Occlumency book." His expression firmed into faint amusement. "You were also mouthing a stanza I knew fairly well."

Neville gave him a considering look, but nodded slowly. Harry knew that set to his face, and knew where it was coming from. Detecting Favreau's Mantle was more work than casting it, and while Alan's getting into the tournament argued that level of skill; Harry, at least, knew that Alan wasn't quite at that level of theory. In fact, Harry knew that Alan was still working on being able to cast the spells of similar level to Favreau's Mantle. It would explain why he was looking at Neville so closely; he hadn't anticipated Neville's skill. Harry suspected that Neville, for his part, was frowning at the second reason. Harry knew he did mouth what he was reading when he was committing it to memory, so it was very possible that, if Alan could read lips, he'd been caught on that. Mind, Harry knew he couldn't. The rest of the excuse was admittedly weak, although bringing in Geoffrey left some wiggle room since Neville only knew the Alfaerus' formidable reputation. However, he was capitulating the point, and Harry didn't want to let that flare up again. Alan's excuse had been shaky, and Harry didn't think either of them would appreciate the truth being demanded.

"What do you plan on covering first, Alan?" Harry asked carefully.

Alan looked back at Harry and gave him a small smirk. "Occlumency, than we'll do the animagi. There's enough of that oil for the three of us, and I have your potion already finished, with some extra, in case one of us has similar need. I trust Neville would like to look at the next step, himself?" Neville nodded slowly, a faint smile on his face. Alan let his mask open enough to allow curiosity to shine through. "What was your form?"

"Dun Arabian stallion." Neville answered, smiling faintly.

Alan's lips quirked. "An excellent form. I wouldn't have expected it of you."

Neville blinked at him, and then let his face blank once more, leaving only the faint tightness to show his displeasure. Alan's comment had been heavily layered with suggestions, and while Neville could catch it, he did not appreciate it. Harry sighed, and stepped up.

"Are you going to speak about more than the beginning exercises of Occlumency, or no?" It was blunt, forward, and altogether Gryffindor, but it would get things moving. Blaise, across from Harry, frowned, but Alan gave him a smile even as Daphne rolled her eyes. Neville smiled wryly, and sat back, glancing over at Alan.

"What branch are you going to cover with us anyways?"

Alan blinked, and gave Neville a long look. "I was thinking of the Plane, really, which is what I was taught by my godfather. Have you read through the entire book?"

Neville nodded and leaned forward on his arms. "Yes, and I preferred the Crystal concept myself. I understood it a lot better."

Alan shrugged. "Daphne couldn't do it, and it's a very blatant defence. You can do more with the Plane than the Crystal."

Harry glanced between them, feeling a pinch that he'd introduced his two highly theoretical friends. All they needed to do was add Hermione, and things would get really thick. He hadn't read the book all the way through, only as far as Alan had recommended. He hadn't bothered to tell Neville to stop; he wouldn't have listened anyways. However, he did want to know what the difference they were discussing was.

"Boys," Harry began. Alan blinked and looked at Harry; Blaise gave him a similar expression of curiosity while Neville paused and stifled a laugh. Turning back to him, Neville dryly asked,

"Yes?"

Harry gave him a sweet smile. "What is the difference between the Plane and the Crystal? Other than one being very Gryffindor, and the other being Slytherin?"

Neville sighed, and glanced at Alan. Alan tilted his head to indicate for him to go first, and Neville sat up to begin. "Crystal is a form of defence based upon creating and maintaining a firm barrier between you and the outside. It is a kind of shield that won't allow anyone to pass it, pretty much locking your mind completely from interference from the outside. It draws upon one's magical reserves for its conception and maintenance, and while maintaining it takes very little effort and it would be one of the last things to go upon a magical drain, putting the defence into place takes a lot of effort, and only someone of, say, my or your or Alan's power would be able to make it work. As Alan said, Daphne wouldn't be able to manage it, and neither would Connor, or, say, Remus. Blaise would probably struggle with it, as would Ron, Hermione, Nanna, Melanie, Sirius, or my mother and father although if they applied themselves they might manage. Your mum would be able to do it fine, but your dad would struggle too."

Harry nodded, and turned to Alan. Alan gave Neville an admiring nod, and began. "The Plane is based firmly upon meditation. Both defences require meditation for their conception, but the Plane draws upon it for the defence itself. It's a matter of making it so that you are not drawing connections within your mind outside of what you don't mind someone finding. Defending yourself like this takes a lot of

discipline and work; you have to have a very organized mindset, and you need to have complete control over your emotions so as not to give yourself away. For the memories and thoughts you don't want someone to find, you need to make a safe haven for them, usually with the aid of focused mental imagery. You take a concept and allow it to consume everything you don't want found, and hold it in place. No one can glimpse anything that is beyond that image. Essentially, you're creating a hidden cupboard or room behind a common area that doesn't really need defending. If you are strong enough, and feel the need you can actively block someone out – the crystal simply does so passively, without discretion and can block more than one person at a time with ease."

Harry nodded once more, feeling a lot more secure in his concept of what these were, and then he frowned. "But you could lose the Plane if your concentration slips, couldn't you?" Alan nodded. "Neville's sounds more secure." Harry observed. Alan snorted.

"It's definitely secure. To get past a Crystal defence you have to overpower the person you're aiming at, and with someone of your or Neville's power, that would be bloody hard. It also stands out like a sore thumb; the person will know they're being blocked immediately. With the Plane, it's hard to notice the subterfuge at all, unless you make a mistake, or the person is very aware of what they're looking for. If chosen correctly, the image will seem like just another part of the mental landscape, or a particularly vivid memory."

"But if you can't keep a tight rein on yourself," Neville added, "everything can fall apart and the information will be found out anyways."

Harry frowned. "But you can maintain the Plane even without magic. You can't do that for the Crystal. How hard is it to set those up and take them down anyways?"

Neville frowned. "For the Crystal, you'd have to take a minute to put it up, and you'd have to think to take it down. If you got the hang of it, and you're strong, it could be quick, but otherwise ..."

"The Plane can be set up or abandoned at any time." Alan threw in. "Although eventually it will become an ingrained habit. Blocking someone out actively, obviously, takes focus, and more than one would be very difficult."

"And to mix them?" Harry asked. Neville and Alan were silent for a moment, and Blaise sighed.

"Why bother? One would work fine, wouldn't it, and learning both would take a lot of extra work."

Alan sneered. "Blaise, learning both with the weaknesses he pointed out would be very wise. You would have a defence that would be practically impenetrable, but if you needed a subtler approach, you could drop it and not be vulnerable. In fact, learning both they would think to look for a second defence even less, especially if they had to get past the first."

"And if I refuse to learn both?" Blaise countered. "I don't need a wall glaring that I'm separate from the world."

"I won't make you." Alan returned. "Personally, I appreciate the Plane and don't intend to learn the Crystal method, but if Harry or – Longbottom so desire, they may."

Neville ruffled his hair and sighed. "If you would not think it too presumptuous, you may call me Neville if I may call you Alan, Prince."

Alan smiled and nodded carefully, and Harry hid a smile. He was pleased to see Alan and Neville getting along. He supposed having a magical theory discussion was enough to make anyone appreciate the other. Neville had impressed Alan, and Alan already fascinated Neville, so he supposed that was enough to draw them together around him. Catching Daphne watching him from her silent position across the table, Harry felt his smile grow a little wider and sat back to listen as Alan began the lecture on the necessary meditation exercises for working on the Occlumency shields.

By the time the Tournament revealed the third task to the Champions, Harry was feeling a lot better about his Animagus. The potion had induced an even deeper trance than the herbs, and the information about what the dragon was and what it meant for him seemed to simply float into his mind and imbed itself. Similarly, Alan had desired to take the potion himself upon discovering his Animagus was a kneazle, of all things. Blaise had sneered and offered the suggestion that it had to do with longstanding family lines that created magical creatures as Animagi; Harry had woken for the tail end, to find Blaise and Neville in a fierce argument about bloodlines and magical theory, with Alan lying calmly near the table, already having woken and taken the potion in turn. Daphne had been beside him, disinterested in the argument and the search for animagi as it was. She had admitted to being a robin, but had no desire to further study the goal. She'd mostly come along because Alan had invited her, and it had been her or Lucille, another friend. Harry had nodded, and returned to observing the argument for the forty-five minutes it took for Alan to wake and tell them to shut up. Harry had learned a lot listening in, about genealogy and magic. Leaving with Neville had been entertaining. Returning the next weekend for further Occlumency practice had been even more so. Apparently introducing Neville to the Slytherins brought out his competitive nature, and Blaise seemed only too willing to take him on.

Occlumency itself was going well. Harry was practicing both theories, along with Neville, whom he'd talked into learning both as well, and while the Slytherins were only learning the Plane, Alan was checking out the Crystal theory as a possible fallback for himself. He was having difficulty, however, managing the twist of thought to bring up the shield. Neville had been mostly talked into the Plane because he had found the Crystal almost too easy, managing his defences shortly before May 27th, when Alan discovered what the next task would be. After that fact, they didn't meet in the Chamber again, Alan trusting Neville to be able to coach Harry easily through the Occlumency trials. Neville's skill had apparently impressed Alan more than Harry had ever expected, and Neville made a point of brushing off the import of that trust, likely on purpose to avoid thinking about it.

After May, however, Harry rarely saw Alan at all outside of class. He was focused intensely upon brushing up on spells and defences

against whatever he might encounter in the maze. Neville noticed Harry's growing worry, and stepped up making him work on his Occlumency. He couldn't test Harry's progress like Alan could, but he could certainly tell if Harry's mind was wandering or not simply by watching his posture. They spent much of their time in the library, and Harry didn't complain. He appreciated Neville's understanding of his friendship with Alan now, and drew on Neville's grudging trust in Alan's abilities to calm himself down.

By the time Alan spared a short moment to come into the library and check on them, Harry had made a large amount of progress in being able to maintain his Occlumency in the Plane format. Alan was suitably surprised with Neville's ability as well, and gave them both short smiles before he asked for a book they'd recommend he look through for useful spells. Neville jokingly mentioned a prank book Sirius had given him, and Alan seriously asked for it. Neville shrugged, and left with only a short curious glance to go find it. Harry took advantage of his absence to look Alan over. He didn't look anywhere near as worried as he had before the other tasks, and Harry said so. Alan shrugged it off.

"I'm confident in being able to pass most of the difficulties they could throw at me. I'm just brushing up, mostly, and keeping focused. I don't have much time to worry about how the people around me are doing, so ..."

Harry just nodded, and sighed. "I'm glad you like Neville."

Alan gave him a sharp look, and shrugged awkwardly. "He's alright. Sharp as a dagger and smart as a whip; he learns amazingly quickly and has a healthy dose of sense besides." Alan smiled wickedly. "He doesn't seem to like Slytherin games much, though."

Harry shook his head. "No, he doesn't like those at all, but he can understand them pretty well. He just refuses to play."

"Yeah ..." Alan leaned back in his chair, and looked up as Neville came back with the book. Neville noticed their immediate attention and flushed slightly before sitting back down and pushing the book over to Alan, returning to his reading.

Alan watched him for a moment, and frowned irritably. He was looking at the book Neville was reading, and Harry couldn't think why for a moment. Then he remembered Neville's dislike of studying and felt a suspicion form. Chewing his lip, Harry waited before he decided to ask anyways. He was working off of deduction on his part; it wouldn't give anything away, and he could be careful.

"Neville ... you hate studying." Harry pointed out. "And you really don't like the History of Magic textbook."

Neville looked up and blinked, before checking the cover of his book. Mildly startled at seeing it, he frowned and tapped the top of the cover with his wand, mouthing several words carefully. The image flickered and changed to a Defence tome, and settled. He looked up at Harry. "Does that make more sense?"

Harry fought not to smile, but could feel himself failing. He nodded solemnly anyways. "Yes, it does."

"Pray tell," Alan asked carefully. "What are you reading and ... was that Favreau's again?"

Neville sighed and closed the book, his hand in place. He quickly let the glamour drop, revealing a book on myths and legends before it went back up. "Yes, it's Favreau's Mantle again. I hadn't changed it from when I'd been reading during History of Magic, so ... you still curious about me knowing it?"

Alan opened his mouth carefully, closed it, and then frowned and asked. "How many other spells of that level do you know?"

Neville shrugged. "Not a lot; just the ones that caught my eye. A few shields, the Patronus charm, and a few shady spells I really shouldn't know," He paused, and shrugged uncomfortably, "Gremlin's Illusion Wall, and Porrybaxter's Wall of Wings. Nothing else, yet. Those were the ones I made a point of looking up in particular, the rest ..." Neville shrugged. "Didn't interest me."

Alan looked a little appeased; none of the spells were really extraordinary, they were just unexpected in someone that age. Technically, Alan knew more than Neville did, which was a balm to his wounded pride, but it didn't erase that Neville had learned higher level spells, and simply for the sake of curiosity as well. "I'd like to see about checking out what all you know; maybe we could practice some together. I've had difficulty with Porrybaxter's Wall."

Harry fought to keep his face clear. Alan was trying to get Neville to help him learn those without hinting that the theory was frustrating him. It was amusing in a strange sort of way. Neville looked like he missed the hidden meanings, which was good for both of them in remaining friends and nodded.

"I haven't managed to get the Greenhorn Wall to work for me yet, some help wouldn't go amiss. Maybe you could show me some absolutely impossible spells I've seen in some seventh year texts." Seventh year was something Alan knew well, a level below the other spells Neville had listed.

Alan smiled warmly. "I'd love to. I'm curious, what sort of shady spells do you know anyways?"

Neville gave Alan a blank look. It was clear he was upset; that line between his brows seemed completely impossible to get rid of, but it was a look that let just how put off he was go unseen. Harry paused, considering, and then answered. "It was Neville who taught me Fiendfyre."

Neville turned a glare on Harry that would have done Snape proud, but Alan's eyes widened. "Fiendfyre? I thought that was really out of control."

"It is." Neville snapped. "I shouldn't have looked it up, but I was curious. I know how to cast it, control it as much as is possible, and put it out, but it's not something I play with on a regular basis." He finished acerbically. Harry wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

Alan nodded slowly. "It wouldn't be. You keep surprising me, Neville. It's unexpected."

"Because I'm a Gryffindor?" Neville asked contemptuously. Harry bit his lip; he really shouldn't have spoken up.

"No," Alan answered calmly, unperturbed by Neville's temper, "because Light families aren't known for explorative intelligence without putting limits on what is, and is not to be learned."

Neville watched him with a frown still, and then settled. "I suppose. Knowledge has never felt evil to me, so I don't see what the whole point of controlling it would be."

"Good to know." Alan smiled, and then glanced worriedly at his watch. Swearing softly, he stood. "May I borrow this?" He brandished the book Neville had fetched for him, and Neville shrugged and nodded. He smiled, and strode quickly from the library, leaving them in peace. Harry watched him go, and then turned back to Neville to find himself fixed with his friend's firm eyes. Harry shifted awkwardly.

"I didn't ever say you could bandy that about, Harry." Neville growled lowly.

Harry shrugged awkwardly. "He already knew I knew it, and had had it taught to me."

"Harry ... Please." Neville kept a disappointed look on Harry, and Harry shifted before nodding slowly. Neville wasn't proud of everything he'd ever taught himself. He shouldn't have spoken up.

A/N: Well, here's the next chapter. I hope you like it. I know you'll like the next few. grin Thank you ever so much for everyone who reviewed last chapter, and please Review this one too! I welcome all the feedback I can get.

Also, I have a small question for my readers: I'm onto sixth year now (fifth year is with my Beta) and I have a few things that I'm curious as to what you all think. First, do you want to see them make a short trip to Salem during the summer, and second, does anyone want to know more about vampires? Either way, it's workable. I just want to know

what you think. Also, next chapter: the rating goes up. Just to warn you.

Thank you for reading! Please review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-four

The night before the third task, Alan stayed in his father's rooms, enjoying supper alone with him, and just relaxing after all the revision he'd done in the month since he'd had the task revealed. It was also a good break from worrying about being hexed in his sleep, or worrying about a hexed door in the morning. Severus had reassured him that Geoffrey and Ginger would be there the next morning, to talk and just stay with him until the evening meal and the beginning of the task. Alan had been tired, and hadn't asked how they were going to keep his godfather in America. They'd have something, he was sure.

He woke after Severus had already gone to breakfast, and went to a late meal himself, pleased with the sleep, and eager to see Geoffrey and Ginger. Blaise frowned to see him show up later, and Daphne clucked faintly at him. There were several present; they'd taken to spending a bit more time as a group since the article had been published about Amber.

"Alan, where were you?"

"With my father, Daphne."

Daphne blinked, and then blushed slightly. "Well, tell us, alright? Lucille is double-checking the dorms." Alan's raised eyebrow brought a snort. "You've been keeping in contact with all of us at all times since this started, and then you disappear just before the task without telling us."

Alan shrugged, disguising his discomfort. He had disappeared. "I'm sorry to have worried you, but Severus just picked me up from class without telling me I'd be staying the night with him. I'll let her know I'm fine when she returns, but she may come after my guardians arrive."

Daphne sighed. "Fine, I'll let her know."

"How's Theodore?" Alan asked. Theodore Nott had been catching flack for tying himself to Alan and leaving his neutrality, and thus his group had been keeping an extra eye on him. Tracey hadn't seemed to mind the extra contact at all, and Theo had seemed unencumbered

by the extra attention from her as well. Alan was amused, but kept it from his face.

Lucille did return before Severus came down the aisle to tap him on the shoulder and inform him to leave to the small room off the Great Hall. Grateful to leave Lucille's thorough practice in how to make him feel embarrassed for disappearing on them without making a single direct comment on it, Alan smiled at them, and waved them to their tests as he made his own way to the room and stepped carefully inside. Krum was talking avidly in Bulgarian to his own family, and Fleur was holding his sister's hand and speaking to her mother in French. To the far corner, however, Geoffrey was talking angrily into a mirror he had in his hand, as Andrew leaned against the wall nearby with a casual cast to his own pose, Koreol blending into the shadows further back. Andrew noticed him come in first, and a smile spread across his face.

"Alan! Geoffrey's having a conniption, and Ginger's keeping an eye on the little buggers and your bratty godfather."

Alan laughed lowly. "You mean Lyall didn't get to try out the new knots she'd learned? She was sure they'd hold."

"They do." Andrew reassured him. "But last night was the full moon, and it fell to Ginger, and the brat got out of her work, and so dad's busy sitting on him."

"Ouch. You're here to watch me get fried?"

"Nooo." Andrew glared. "I'm here to watch you win."

Alan rolled his eyes, and smiled, giving Andrew a short boy hug before turning his eyes to Geoffrey. He was talking so quickly it was almost unintelligible, but just as Alan was managing to figure out what he was talking about, Alan heard another demand come through, and Geoffrey lost his temper. His words of choice made the entire room turn and stare, and he didn't seem to notice, although he toned his voice back down to near silence after his singular outburst. Whatever he added made the person on the other end – most likely Alan's godfather – give up, and he put it away in time to hear Gabrielle

Delacour innocently ask of her mother, speaking surprisingly good English,

“What’s a ‘Damn black pole-dancer’, and why would he try on an English Setter?”

Geoffrey flushed as Gabrielle’s mother glared at him, and Alan tried hard not to laugh. It was an effort. Andrew rolled his eyes and slung an arm around Alan’s shoulders.

“So, whom can you introduce me to?”

“Next to nobody.” Alan returned. “They’re all taking exams. If you’re lucky, Draco Malfoy and his gang’ll accost us at lunch, but you’re not allowed to threaten to bite them. Nobody really likes vampires around here.”

Andrew growled. “Yeah, ‘part-human’ and all that.”

“Andrew Arie.” Koreol admonished. “We are outside of our sphere of influence.”

Andrew ducked his head quietly, and then looked at Alan. “So, what can you show us?”

“Perhaps the library, or the grounds. Durmstrang came over on a ship that showed up in the lake.” Alan offered.

“The ship showed up in the lake?” Geoffrey asked, startled. “How did it do that?”

“Don’t know. It looked like a whirlpool when it came, but other than that I can’t tell you.” Alan shrugged. “You’d have to ask a Durmstrang student, but I don’t know if they’ll tell you or not. We can certainly go look at it.”

“How’d Beauxbatons show up?” Andrew asked.

“Flying horses and a carriage.”

"I haven't seen one of those in ages." Koreol quietly allowed.

Alan smiled. "Outside it is."

Andrew sighed. "And I was looking forward to scaring the poor studiers."

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The time outside lasted until lunch, when Geoffrey insisted on checking out the Whomping Willow he'd glimpsed while they were looking at the carriage. Since both adults were interested, Alan and Andrew had allowed them their time. Upon heading inside, Geoffrey was nursing a bruise on his arm and Koreol was watching him with amusement as he quietly griped.

Sitting down with his group, Alan smiled at all of them as they looked at his companions with surprise, or suspicion.

"Everybody, this is Geoffrey Alfaerus, my uncle, Andrew Mayfair, my good friend, and Koreol O'Shaunel, Andrew's mentor." Alan indicated each of them in turn, and then turned around to look at his coterie. Most of them were staring at Andrew and Koreol, and it was easy to tell those that knew how to identify vampires and those that didn't: The ones that did were several times paler than normal. Stifling his amusement, Alan continued introductions, "Geoffrey, Andrew, Koreol, these are Lucille, Salvador, Blaise, Theodore, Daphne and Tracey. Stephanie, Dillan, and Malcolm are elsewhere." He indicated each student in turn, and behind him, he saw Geoffrey give a jaunty wave, while Koreol nodded solemnly. Koreol then leaned down to whisper into Andrew's ear and then he turned and left. Andrew sat comfortably next to Alan, and purposefully leaned against his shoulder, ignoring Alan's glare.

"Well, hello everyone. How are all you pretty Brits doing?" He winked at Daphne, who blushed lightly but didn't look away. Lucille rolled her eyes.

"Are all Americans crazy?"

"In magical Salem they are." Alan and Andrew answered together. Lucille gave them a cautious look, and then shook her head.

"Forget I asked."

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Geoffrey insisted upon a tour of the castle afterwards. Koreol seemed to enjoy it as well, but Andrew was disappointed that Draco had avoided them and he didn't get a chance to intimidate the runt, to use his choice of words. Just before they went back to supper, when they were still out of general sight, Andrew stopped Alan and leaned over to peck a quick kiss on his throat. Alan pulled back shortly, and then laughed as Andrew gave him another flirtatious look. Alan shook his head; the gesture was tied to him being a vampire, and was supportive, but it still felt really weird.

"Gee, thanks." Alan drawled.

"Anytime." Andrew injected his innuendo once more, and Alan stalked past him to sit once more with his friends, Koreol and Geoffrey following. Koreol looked around the hall, and then sat bonelessly beside him, pushing Geoffrey aside, much to his annoyance.

"Alan, who are the men who joined the staff table?"

Alan glanced up, and recognized the jovial face of Ludo Bagman and, beside him, Kenner Templar. "Ludo Bagman and Kenner Templar. Templar replaced Crouch."

Koreol nodded his head slowly, and then sat back and gave Geoffrey a long look. Geoffrey didn't notice at first, but finally he looked up and frowned at Koreol.

"Fuck - off. There are enough expendable people hanging around you can pick someone else."

Alan snorted, and Koreol sighed, returning to gazing calmly around the Hall. Beside him, Stephanie flinched away slightly, keeping her

eyes on him in a cautious but curious manner. Alan didn't know if Koreol noticed the attention or not. He certainly didn't respond to it.

Daphne, however, spoke up, "Couldn't the kitchens provide something?"

Koreol looked over at her, and sighed. "Packaged blood is rather ... substandard."

"Which means vampires don't like eating leftovers." Geoffrey added. "If it's already been bled out once, they don't like drinking it back up. They can, but then you get a pissy vampire. And nobody likes a pissy vampire."

"But you'd rather he be pissy than drink from you, though." Alan added.

"And how often do you share with Andrew?" Geoffrey returned. Alan fell silent, and Andrew gave him another considering glance. Alan returned his gaze with raised eyebrows.

"I've got an obstacle course to beat coming up." Alan primly returned. "I need all my strength. Andrew can take a chunk out of someone else."

"You make it sound so violent, Alan." Andrew whined. "It doesn't hurt, and you know it."

"Fine." Alan drawled. "You still need to get your own donor. And hopefully without pissing off Dumbledore."

Geoffrey opened his mouth to comment, but shut it as Alan glared and muttered instead under his breath, making Koreol fight down a small smile. Alan sighed and turned back to his meal, pushing the remaining food around a moment without much appetite. This was the last task, and the last chance for him to get screwed over. This was the last chance ... he doubted they'd simply put his name in to make everyone dislike him. No, they wanted him hurt ...

"Koreol, wouldn't you have drunk before coming here anyways?" Alan asked, trying to distract himself from his own worries.

Koreol frowned slightly. "Yes, but I want to make sure I'm not working half-cocked in case you get in trouble. Andrew should be fine without anything more this evening. He drank this morning as well." He gave Andrew a short glare, which Andrew met with a puppy look for only a moment, before nodded shortly and dropping his gaze submissively. Beside Koreol, Stephanie cleared her throat. Alan and the rest of his group all turned to her.

"I'm seventeen." She offered. "And ... and if it's ... not going to hurt, or – or make me feel ill or something, I'd be willing to ... help, to make sure you can help Alan if trouble hits."

Alan raised his eyebrows. "You don't have to, Stephanie." He commented. "Koreol would be fine without."

"I don't need you to feel obligated to offer, child." Koreol added.

"I'm not." She added, and then blushed lightly. "I'm ... I'm also a ... tad ... curious ..."

"Ah." Koreol smiled widely, and although Alan couldn't see his face, he strongly suspected Stephanie was getting a very good view of his fangs. When she squeaked lightly, Alan shook his head, and laughed faintly with Andrew. "If you would find a safe place where there would be no disturbances, it would be best." Koreol finished. "Preferably before we need to go down to the stands."

Stephanie nodded carefully, and then turned back to her meal. Koreol turned away, and immediately engaged Geoffrey in discussing the use of the Whomping Willow and possibly planting one at Salem. Five minutes later, during which Andrew somehow coaxed Alan to eat a small amount more, Stephanie blushed at her friends, and squeaked that she suspected she needed to go to the bathroom, and left, clutching her purse. The other girls laughed quietly, turning to their own discussion. Alan found himself smiling. That was an excellent escape.

Not two minutes later, Dumbledore stood, and smiled across the students.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, in five minutes time I will be asking all of you to make your way down to the Quidditch pitch for the third and last task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman to the stadium now.”

Alan licked his lips nervously and stood, turning without looking back to leave the Great Hall with Viktor and Fleur. He held his silence as he went, and quietly allowed his mind to calm in preparation for whatever they might throw at him. He couldn’t change anything now except to face what might come.

The thick, twenty-foot tall hedge running all the way around the edges of the stadium now hid the maze they were to traverse. Bagman led them to a single, dark opening and they waited there in silence for the five minutes to pass, and the murmur of the crowd to begin as they filed into the stands above. The four teachers who’d be watching for them to request aid introduced themselves, and then went back to patrolling the edges, as Bagman finally cast sonorous once more and began the announcement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! In first place, with ninety points, Alan Prince!” The applause was loud, louder than Alan had really expected considering the lingering resentment for his appointment. “In second place, at eighty points, Viktor Krum!” The stands exploded in sound, which Bagman had to wait out for a moment before he finished. “And third place, Fleur Delacour!”

Alan’s eyes scanned the crowd and lit not upon his family, but Harry and his family instead, the Longbottoms seated next to them. Harry was watching him in turn, but Alan didn’t let his face change a whit as he continued to look around, stifling his nervousness as Bagman moved on in his announcing.

“So … On my whistle, Alan.” Bagman raised the whistle, and Alan faced the opening with a firm push against his own dread.

The shrill blast echoed behind him, and Alan moved quickly into the maze, feeling both relief and mild worry when the sound from outside cut off as soon as he entered. The height of the hedges, and the growing darkness above made the ground shadowed and a small challenge to traverse safely. He watched it carefully, and then watched the sky once more, before moving on without casting any spells. Better to not ruin his night vision unless there was a need.

After fifty yards, the way forked and Alan paused before choosing left, moments before the whistle sounded again. Krum had entered the maze. Alan glanced ahead, still watching the ground before he moved forward once more, walking briskly. There appeared to be nothing along this branch, but the path turned right and Alan went around the corner and paused. Silently he cast *lumos* and studied the path ahead for what had made him suspicious. The whistle sounded again and made him jump, and then he caught sight of the lines against the hedges on both sides. He brightened his light, and picked out what had concerned him. They were ropes, leading to the ground that was littered with loose dirt and a faint pattern that shouldn't have been there. Alan couldn't help it; he smiled. It was a net, and the trigger was right at the edge, spelled only lightly and appeared to be ... Alan cast a quick detecting spell and smiled. He was right. It was simply tripwire, jinxed to make one stumble off balance and forward into the net. However, he could find no other triggers, and cautiously he stepped over the tripwire and walked across the net, and continued up the path.

He went further, and took a left at the next fork, getting halfway before he heard a startled scream behind him. He laughed. Apparently one of the others had taken his path and had not caught sight of the trap, falling prey to it. He turned forward, and stopped completely, feeling something tingling just in front of his foot. Looking down, he saw a faint shimmering patch just in front of his foot, like heat off of pavement except this was dirt and cold, and Alan pulled his weight back completely before casting a detection spell. The patch was a *confundus* spell, waiting to take hold when he removed his foot from its edge. Alan frowned and countered it. He hadn't been paying attention and nearly been caught. That wouldn't do. But he didn't want to use too much magic. Finally, he just slowed down, and

cast a quick point me spell. Without a specified target, the spell pointed due North. The middle of the maze was Northwest. Alan moved on.

The next two paths were empty, and then he moved forward, turned a corner and froze. On the ground before him, a dark-haired man was sprawled, facedown, his arm reaching forward before his drawn and pained face. Alan felt sweat break out on his back, and he swallowed.

“Riddikulus!” He cast quickly, and the man was suddenly standing, and leaned back to kick up into a handstand. Alan laughed as he always did, and then cast a quick banishment spell, sending the boggart elsewhere. Once it was gone, Alan allowed himself a moment to calm down. He hated boggarts.

Further through the maze Alan went, and he had to disable two more traps and passed several other spells laced across the ground. Walking past another entrance, he glanced inside and felt a sense of hopelessness in ever finding the end of the maze. Alan closed his eyes for a moment, and then glanced around curiously. As he'd suspected, on the edge of the maze near the bottom, a round rock was sitting there. Alan glared at it, and chose another direction. The feeling followed him, and when he turned, there was a rock just to one side of the path. Alan huffed. It was a damn pogrebin. For a moment, he couldn't think of anything that might get the ridiculous creature to leave him alone, and he carefully closed his eyes and occluded. It was just a silly creature. It didn't take much to get rid of them; they weren't actually rocks. Alan opened his eyes and aimed.

“Reducto!”

The creature shrieked as it shredded, leaving a darkening patch on the ground as it bled. Alan turned away with a faint twitch, and continued along the path ahead of him. He hit another dead end, checked his direction, and then turned back and took another turn. Ahead was a golden mist. Alan eyed it suspiciously. He thought he'd run into something like that before ... possibly at Salem in one of the teacher's doors ... He suspected it had been the Alfaerus patriarch who'd used it, actually, and it reversed the world ... Alan had never gone through his door again.

Sighing, Alan walked forward, and hesitantly stepped into the mist. Immediately, he felt a tug on the soles of his shoes, and he shut his eyes firmly, ignoring the vertigo and purposefully stepping forward again, not waiting. The return of his centre of gravity hit him like a brick wall and he dropped to his knees breathing deeply and reverting to his meditation by habit. Once his heart had stopped pounding, he continued forward, and froze as a scream cut through the maze. It sounded like Fleur! Alan stopped, breathed, and then shook his head and moved forward. She'd gotten herself into this, and the teachers were to watch them. It was her prerogative.

Alan was still more cautious as he moved forward again.

Ten minutes later, and he was cursing himself for being a fool. He was presently stuck in net, hung at the top of the hedges. It gave him a good look at the stands around the maze, but he was more interested in getting out of it right now, than admiring the stars. However, the problem that was currently bothering him was that twenty-foot fall beneath him. He had to get the net undone, and then get to the ground without injury. Not a good combination. Of course, he'd been stupid to end up stuck here. He'd stepped over the tripwire, and dead onto the pressure pad.

Finally, however, he got himself shifted enough to get the switchblade out of his shoe, and he returned to glaring at the ropes at the top. He'd already tried ten different spells, and a conjured blade and none of them had worked, so plain steel it was. He heard something beneath him and prayed it wasn't one of the other champions – he did not need another complication – and continued eyeing the ropes to find the one he needed to cut to get more room without dropping him twenty feet. He found one, and placed the knife to cut before his mind caught up with him, and he looked down – and froze.

The skrewts had gotten huge. One crawled beneath him, the sting curled over only a few feet below him. It was at least ten feet long, with dark, shiny armour and scary-as-Hell pincers. He held his breath as it moved beneath him, but it seemed determined to move far too slowly for his comfort. He wanted this done with.

Alan turned and quickly stuck his wand just outside of the net before trying to cast a blasting curse. It didn't work, and Alan swore. The net was cancelling all his attempts at magic, dammit!

The skrewt still wasn't moving, so Alan finally just gave up and put his wand into his wrist holster. He was done waiting. He put the knife back against the rope and quickly cut several links on the side, creating a small hole. He was very, very careful; falling onto the skrewt would be worse than falling to the plain dirt. The dirt wouldn't actively try to kill him immediately if the fall itself didn't.

The hole was relatively easy. Getting out of it was harder. Getting down was looking fucking scary, because that skrewt still hadn't left. But Alan was determined, and stubbornly pulled himself out of the net, and then, once free of the stupid dampening effect of the net, conjured a nice rope ladder to get down on one side of the skrewt. He was halfway down when the skrewt shifted in his direction and Alan felt like cursing. They never had figured out how skrewts sensed their surroundings without heads, but he wasn't happy to have it confirmed that they certainly could do so. Stubbornly, he held onto where he was, and cast a reflection spell on the ground, followed by a stunner to rebound off the patch. The skrewt shuddered and dropped, and Alan quickly finished getting down, and left – very quickly – once more along the path he'd been walking before he got himself in trouble.

Moving forward was getting a little more complex, and finally Alan glared at the mess of wavering spells before and behind him. He was currently treading a path that couldn't be more than a foot wide between all of them, and was glaring at the jump required ahead. Even considering keeping a spell up long enough to be able to walk past these like he was currently doing made him feel dizzy. He was glad to be spared the necessity; he wanted to be as fresh as possible when he reached the cup, because he felt even more powerfully that something was not going to go right once he reached there.

Alan made the jump, and looked gratefully at the end of the shimmering ground ahead of him at the end of the same thin path. He could only thank that the spells stopped at the hedge, leaving the corner - about ten square feet - clear. He stepped past the corner,

and swore as several dark creatures suddenly dove at his face. He stopped himself stepping backwards with effort – he'd foolishly just skirted the patches, and dove forward, stopping as he felt something press against his ankle and throwing himself sidelong into the safe corner, feeling sharp, tiny claws rake his hair, and an annoying buzzing hover around his head. Alan quickly rolled over and shouted a blasting hex, one after another. The claws retreated, and Alan sat up and opened his eyes, hexing the next dark creature to try dive-bombing him again, and then freezing a small grouping that was huddling above his head. He looked quickly around himself once more, and, feeling no other dive-bombs, he stood shakily and nearly tripped. He quickly bent to look over his ankle and swore at the numb feeling that was infusing his foot. A glance ahead showed another net hung high above, the wire ahead loose and on the ground, dim traces of a spell lingering around it. Alan tried several counters, and, at the second, feeling returned in a rush of pins and needles, making him gasp and shudder slightly. This was going to be trouble, but it should fade soon enough.

Alan checked the path before him, finding nothing hiding beneath or beyond the net and continuing down the open path. He had to pause at the next path, and smiled grimly. There was a plant blocking his way, thrashing and reaching for the food it could feel standing there: Devil's Snare. Even as he looked, however, he suspected it was two different plants. They wouldn't make passage impossible in any of the paths, unless they were going to be asses and block off a dead end to make it seem like a path, but if he could hold the spell that might just be the way to the middle and the end of this tomfoolery ...

Alan cast point me and studied it carefully. He'd been circling around in all sorts of directions, and he felt a strong suspicion this was the way in ...

Deciding to chance it, Alan quickly cast a circle of fire, and looped it into circling him. He then drew Harry's wand, borrowed with permission this time, and carefully cast a second, setting it higher around his head, before he walked carefully into the mess of thrashing vines. The Devil's Snare was extremely unhappy about him defying it so, but it wasn't careful enough, or smart enough to be able to foil his rings of fire and avoid his subtle adjustments to keep it

away from him. It was a very long walk, however, and getting past it, he came into the light in the centre of the maze. Standing on a plinth ahead of him gleamed the Triwizard cup. Seeing it gave Alan a strong sense of relief. So little time left for something to go wrong.

There were no more traps he could see ahead of himself, and he cast two detection spells just to be sure, and then he jogged out of the paths and up to the plinth. He looked around as soon as he came into the open and saw a spider on the far side from him. It was huge, and Alan didn't want to have anything to do with it. He leaped forward to the cup, wanting the task to end, and grabbed it without thinking.

As his hand closed, he felt a sickening tug in his gut, and his eyes widened even as he was pulled away from the spider. This wasn't supposed to be happening! How could the cup be a portkey? He cursed himself as he spun away, and hoped against all of his sense that this was just part of the task, maybe it went out of the maze to a podium or something. The cold dread in his stomach told him otherwise, but for the moment, he hoped.

The landing knocked his balance off completely, and Alan hit the ground and rolled away from the cup. He came to his feet and looked around frantically, taking in the dark trees, the lower horizon where the mountains of Hogwarts were gone and the tombstones among which he stood. He heard a faint hiss ahead of him and his eyes locked onto it. It was moving away, hissing unintelligibly and he stepped several steps closer, eyes still scanning frantically. This wasn't Hogwarts. This likely wasn't even near it, and he hoped against hope that it was all just a mistake, but even as he thought it he felt a dull headache start on the right side of his head and ground his teeth, pulling back. Even as he did so he heard a rustle behind him, heard the spell cast and turned only in time to see a dark hooded figure and a flash of red light before he blacked out.

III

Alan felt the blackness pull back, and blinked the haze out of his mind as he looked into a pale, drawn face with gleaming red eyes. It took him a moment to adjust, and he realized quickly that he was blind in his right eye. Alan growled, and pulled back from the thin fingers he

could feel caressing the side of his face. His head connected with stone before he got far, and he tilted his head to the side to get away. A high laugh greeted his response, and Alan quickly flexed against the expected bonds. They were tight, and encased him from shoulders to hips. He wasn't going to be moving anytime soon. Frustrated, Alan glared at the red-eyed ... man before him who he suspected to be Voldemort.

The thought made his mouth dry out and sweat broke out on his back. He swallowed painfully and quickly looked around the graveyard.

He hadn't been moved from the scene he'd glimpsed when he'd come off the portkey, but the crowd had certainly grown. There was a broken circle of Death Eaters around the tombstone he was bound to, large gaps as though there were less numbers than expected. All of them were garbed in generic black robes, the hoods raised and white masks covering their faces. Upon one, a silvery hand gleamed at one arm, caressed lovingly beneath an unmasked, mousy face.

"Alan ... Prince, I believe?"

Alan turned angrily to the sibilant voice, ignoring the warmth weeping from his right eye. It was expected, with the deep ache he could feel. His eye had never been the same since that night ...

"Yes, Tom?" Alan spat.

Voldemort froze, and casually stepped forward and slapped him. Alan ignored the sting and returned his gaze unerringly. He wondered what he looked like, with his eye most likely staring blindly ... weeping tears and possibly blood ... the ugly scar bisecting the middle, a tight knot of tissue that never belonged in an eye, that he had disguised before he'd even known what it was, without even knowing it was there ...

"You will not call me that, child. You are the son of Severus Snape, yes?"

Alan paused, and shrugged. "Nope."

Voldemort eyed him incredulously and then began to chortle darkly. A wave of laughter swept the gathered Death Eaters, faint and insidious. Finally, Voldemort stepped closer to him again and smiled. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

Alan shrugged carelessly. “I don’t care what you think.”

“You will shortly, Alan …” Voldemort’s voice caressed his name in a way that made Alan feel filthy. He was definitely having a bath after this …

“As you are well aware, I am Lord Voldemort.”

“Anagram of Tom Marvolo Riddle, I know.” Alan drawled carelessly. Voldemort’s eyes flashed and his wand came up,

“Crucio!”

His senses burst into flame, pain crawling across his body in waves. Alan thrashed against the ropes, grinding his teeth into each other, and then screaming in helpless fury as it didn’t go away. It was hideously painful, inescapable, and he needed it to just stop!

The pain faded, and Alan went lax against the ropes, inordinately grateful they kept him from falling to his knees. He opened his eyes – useless right eye or no – as he heard robes sweep towards him. Looking up put his eyes on level with Voldemort’s and without even thinking, he fell into the barriers he’d practiced with Harry and Neville, and the Crystal shield enveloped his mind before he even considered it. Voldemort’s eyes tightened.

“Intelligent child.” He allowed. “And powerful. But then again, you are Slytherin.” His voice caressed the name, putting the importance on it both of them knew was more than just the House. He raised his hand and stroked it down Alan’s face again. Alan tried to pull away once more, and Voldemort grabbed his chin firmly with his free hand, holding him in place. “You could be great, boy. I’d make you my heir, to the Dark Order I build in this country. Power, wealth, respect …”

"What could you give me that I don't already have?" Alan asked bitterly. "My name, my uncle's name already gives me more than you have here."

"Your uncle?" Voldemort asked curiously. "What uncle is that?"

Alan remained bitterly silent, and Voldemort stepped back fingering his wand carefully. He turned to his Death Eaters silently, and one stepped forward gracefully.

"My Lord, the boy's uncle is Geoffrey Alfaerus, an American who claims to be pureblood."

Alan growled faintly. He recognized Lucius' voice easily.

"Are the Alfaerus not pure?" Voldemort asked carelessly.

"No, my Lord." Lucius spat. "They call themselves pureblood for never marrying muggles, but they freely allow in any mudblood and halfblood that comes their way. Supposing that so long as one has magic, one's parents or family are of no account. They have no standards at all, freely allowing half-breeds among them, and others with impure blood of all kinds."

Alan bit his lip. Oh, he so wanted to call them on their inbreeding but he felt he'd get cursed enough without it that he didn't need to add anything to the fire quite yet.

Voldemort had already turned his attention back as well, and he finally leaned over and grabbed Alan's arm beneath the ropes. A sharp sting of pain made him catch his breath, and he felt faint for a long moment as he became aware of the long cut down his forearm. What had they cut him for? He knew about rituals, he'd learned of them, and there were so many that could be done with blood, to so many ends ... the possibilities made him feel ill. Voldemort watched his face as he came aware of it with an unholy grin.

"Indeed ..." He breathed. "Bone of the father, flesh of the servant, blood of the enemy ... you were instrumental in bringing me back, Alan Snape." He spat, and then slapped him again. It was on the right

side this time, and the hit made pain radiate in waves from his sore eye, bringing on a powerful, further influx of nausea. Voldemort turned back to the gathered Death Eaters.

"You all know I disappeared without warning, and while none of you – not one! – searched me out, I will allow you to know why." He turned and put his angry red eyes on Alan's form. "This child ... a boy foretold to bring my downfall, but only one child out of three. I went after him ..." Voldemort's gaze was powerful, and Alan returned it. He knew the choices he had for that prophecy, of what he knew of the prophecy at least. It had been him, Neville, or Harry. And Alan was fairly sure he knew why he had been chosen ..."And his mother stepped between us. A squib stood between me and my goal ... I foolishly forgot the thread of magic she possessed, enough that her sacrifice had power, power that overcame the curse I threw at her son thereafter.

"My experiments, my goal to overcome death proved true when instead of dying by the curse, I was instead ripped – painfully, unimaginably so – from my body, and rendered powerless, weaker than anything, and meaner than the meanest spirit. I was less than a ghost, without form but I was alive. I hid, waiting." He turned and his red eyes pierced those that surrounded him unforgivingly. "I waited for one of my faithful to search me out, to find me. Instead, I was bereft, left to my own devices, which, in the aim of returning to power, were not enough. Any spells, any potions, required a wand, and limbs. The only power I had left was that of possession, but the only things I could find, and use, were mere animals, animals whose lives were shortened painfully by my presence.

"Finally, three years ago, I got a chance, a possibility. A foolish, weak man stumbled upon my goal and he proved very useful ... a teacher at Dumbledore's school, I subdued him to bring me here, possessed him to keep a careful watch as he carried out my orders. But I was thwarted, by a mere child ... the child who had survived when I hit him with the worst curse in my repertoire, because of his mother. Alan Prince ...

"I returned to hiding, then, returned to my weakened state ... and not even a year ago, the coward Wormtail showed up once more. Having

wandered as a rat for years now, escaping the wrath of his former friends, he found his way to where I was hidden. What a curious affinity with rats, Wormtail ..." Voldemort laid his gaze on the unmasked Death Eater who was stroking his silver hand, and Wormtail flinched. Alan watched him carefully, remembering. Any names he could acquire would be good. "But you were foolish, careless. Hungry one night, he wandered into an inn on the edge of the forest he guessed I stayed in, and ran into Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the ministry of magic. But instead of being the end of his search, Wormtail showed a most unexpected streak of clarity and talked her into walking with him. He overpowered her, and brought her to me and with her came a most unexpected windfall. Inside her mind, behind some very powerful memory charms, Bertha knew much that would aid me.

"The knowledge I gained came at the cost of her mind and body. She was disposed of, and because of Wormtail's most overzealous friends, he too was ill adapted to possession. I was forced to wait, and find a temporary measure for travel ... a simple, weak body strengthened by blood of a unicorn, and my dearest Nagini ..." A snake rose from the grass and pressed against Voldemort's hand, hissing pleasurable. Alan suppressed his self-recrimination – that had been what had distracted him so easily upon arriving here, while Wormtail crept up behind him. "Unable to gain immortality at the time, I settled for a return to my old power, my mortal body. For this, I would need three most powerful ingredients, for this old piece of Dark Magic. One was already on hand," Voldemort looked back at Wormtail, who cowered clutching his silver hand. "The Flesh of the servant."

Alan suppressed the irreverent need to groan at the pun. It was just nerves. Just.

"For the Bone of the father, we came here, to his resting place. But finally ... Blood of the enemy. Wormtail wanted any wizard who hated me, but I, I had my sights set on a specific target ... the boy who had destroyed me could bring me back, in quite the most ironic turn." Alan schooled his face into careful indifference as Voldemort stalked towards him. "But I didn't want a weak child. I wanted no pathetic worm, and with the discovery and ruination of one part of my plans, it

became impossible to further my second goal anyways. I could not aid Alan with no faithful at Hogwarts, but if he was too weak to bypass all standards, then why should I use such weak blood? Anyone can be weak. I might as well use any wizard. Wormtail placed his name in the Goblet, and without any aid ... his name came out, Hogwarts Champion. A Slytherin. A Slytherin who could be great ..." Voldemort whispered harshly. "One to bring honour to his house ... Without any aid, he bought his own victory, and, to make sure I could finish my ritual, I had Wormtail subjugate Karkaroff at the school to spell the cup into a portkey and place it in the centre ... whichever child came through first would be brought here, to revive me. And lo and behold ... it was Alan Prince. Alan Snape." Voldemort spat Severus' name with hatred glowing in his eyes. Alan prayed his father would not come and answer the call, even if he heard it. He would die, if he did. Voldemort was not pleased.

"And now, here is the child who stole me from my physical body all those years ago. Strong, yes powerful, yes. But nothing compared to my strength. Now I give him one choice ..." Voldemort stepped forward and touched Alan's face again. Alan maintained his indifference and stared blankly back. "Choose between being my enemy, and being my heir. Everything between us draws us together ... the blood of Slytherin in our veins ... shameful parentage that never cared enough ... we are alike, you and I. Now ..."

"I never did want such a tasteless tattoo anyways." Alan drawled, and then he allowed his eyes to sharpen and glare. "And I bow to no one. Not even you, for a chance at power."

Voldemort stepped back with a look of disappointment, and then lazily flicked his wand. Alan felt the curse settle, and he squirmed as his body tingled painfully. It was a minor pain curse, dark, but nowhere near the mind-numbing torture of the Cruciatus.

"It is a pity, Alan, that you refuse me. It means I must kill you." He gave Alan a regretful look, and then raised the spell. "But I will be kind, and allow you the honour of duelling me before your death. I'll allow you to die fighting. Wormtail, loose him."

The ropes faded away, and Alan let them without struggling past it. A glance down showed him his wand not five feet away ... but that was five feet closer to the circle of Death Eaters. A hesitant glance around, and he laid his hand carefully on his left pocket, mirroring the action on the other side to disguise what he had hidden. His hand brushed Harry's wand, the holly and phoenix feather reported to be a brother to Voldemort's. Alan hoped he never grew desperate enough to try and figure it that feature out, but for now ... with his hand on the wood, even through his robes, he carefully summoned his own wand back to him, yielding a mutter of surprise from the gathered Death Eaters as it leapt seemingly on it's own into his hands. Alan stepped forward and faced Voldemort, his head held high.

Voldemort's mouth curved into a smile, and Alan easily bent into a deep, mocking duelling bow, his face watchful on Voldemort's. "I believe a duel starts with a bow, Lord Voldemort." Alan quipped, his tone wry upon the Dark Lord's chosen title. "But I suppose ..." He trailed off as Voldemort bowed back, and then Voldemort straightened, and he danced away from a dark red light ... the Cruciatus ...

Getting his bearings, Alan returned fire with blasting and bone-breaking curses, worried about what would actually help. Voldemort shielded, and returned, still pandering to the Unforgivables, and only the Cruciatus ... not the Killing curse. He was toying with him. Alan, irritated at the ridiculousness of this, and the strain, toyed back. The next curse he cast hit, and Voldemort wheezed as he doubled over for a moment. Alan couldn't help but laugh; he'd cast the ever-so-terrible tickling curse. It didn't hold; Voldemort broke free and returned fire and Alan didn't dodge fast enough.

The pain ripped through his mind, and Alan wasn't aware of hitting the ground. He couldn't think, couldn't breath, and he instinctively curled into a ball on the ground arms over his head, knees tucked into his chest, teeth clenched painfully tight as he struggled not to scream, not to give them the satisfaction ...

When the pain lifted, he took several seconds to acknowledge it, and to believe it wasn't coming back. He straightened shakily, tremors running unbidden down his limbs, and he looked to the ground,

searching for his wand before he faced his enemy again. He found it, dropped a little in front of his curled form. Before he could reach it, Voldemort stepped forward onto it. Alan froze as he heard a faint crack. No ... his wand ...

"I don't think you'll need that," Voldemort hissed, "if you don't even take this fight seriously ..."

Alan looked up and swallowed, feeling the tremors that had subsided return as he stared into pitiless red eyes. And then it didn't matter that his nerve had weakened, because red light flashed from all sides and he screamed without thought, arching backwards into the ground and convulsing in pain. The other curses, two times before had been nothing, nothing to the all consuming agony that ran down his nerves like acid, fire and freezing, aching cold as his mind tried to make sense of the overwhelming sensation. It lasted forever, and then he was shivering on the ground as awareness trickled back into his mind, shaking and shivering without letup, his knees curling weakly into his chest, and his hands cradling his own head. Alan licked dry lips, and watched the ground before his eyes, not even daring to test his muscles quite yet. He blinked as a thin rod was dangled before him, and it took him a moment to focus past it on the face beyond. He wished he hadn't when he looked into amused red eyes.

"Do you feel like fighting yet?"

The honest answer was 'no'; he wanted to run away and curl up until the aches faded and his body felt like actually listening to him without screaming when he told it he wanted to move. But currently the only option he had was 'yes'. It took him three tries to get his mouth damp enough to answer, and even then it was croaked painfully. A chuckle echoed around him, and Alan ignored it as he forced himself to sit up. Grasping his wand from Voldemort, Alan grimaced. There was a crack on one side, breaking to the thick, stringy core. He wasn't surprised that that had been what had prevented a whole break, but his wand was now useless. Alan let his hands fall in apparent despair, and Voldemort laughed.

"Is your wand now useless to you, Alan? Perhaps you should have made better use of it while it still worked." The Death Eaters laughed

with him, and Alan shakily exchanged his wand for Harry's, with a silent promise to not let his friend's wand receive the damage his had. His other hand sought the pocket opposite, and the newest gift from his godfather ... he could only hope he could stomach what it would do.

"Perhaps you should just get this over with, Voldemort." Alan threw.

Voldemort turned another glare on him, and raised his wand. "I think you need some manners, boy. You should not be quite so eager to meet your own death. Shall we say we're sorry for your impudence?"

Alan merely shrugged, and leaned back with a look of boredom. It didn't last as, Voldemort cast, "Imperio."

Fog settled into Alan's mind, a fog of pleasant dreams, and kind words with no worries and no expectations. Beneath it, and below, and everywhere outside the fog, Alan fought and tried and struggled.

"Tell me you hate being impudent, boy."

Alan didn't even consider it. He would not listen to such ridiculousness.

"You will speak as I tell you to! Say it!"

The fog shattered.

"I listen to no one!" Alan screamed. The Death Eaters fell silent, and Voldemort frowned.

"Perhaps we will have to teach you, then ... Dolohov, if you will ..."

Alan glanced for someone to respond, and a masked Death Eater stepped forward, murmuring thanks, before he turned to cast a spell at Alan. Alan shielded; the spell hit like a battering ram, and he stumbled backwards. The second spell immediately after shattered the shield and disappeared, and then the last got through, striking his right shoulder. Alan dropped to his knees with a strangled cry as his skin split and blistered, blood seeping into his robes. Dolohov

stepped closer and cast again, silently. Each flick drew a line of blood, shredding his robes and nicking flesh. Superficial, but stinging pain began to wear, and bleed. Alan flinched away, and tried to act once more, but his wand – Harry's, actually – was summoned from his hand and Dolohov held onto it as he kept stripping his flesh line by line. Another lashed across his cheek, below his right eye, and Alan surged angrily to his feet.

“Enough! Stop it!”

The Death Eaters laughed, and Voldemort blasted him off his feet. Alan fell painfully against a headstone, and slid down as his body refused to respond quickly to his command to stand. Dolohov apparently didn't mind; he quickly moved closer, and cast another spell. Alan bit back a yelp as his wrists jumped together behind his back, rope spinning out to wrap them tightly together. There was no time wasted, no chance given; Dolohov was shortly right beside him, his wand exchanged for a small knife. Alan swallowed the lump in his throat, and tried to struggle uselessly against the weight of Dolohov kneeling on his legs. It didn't work, he was powerless and feeling ill at the implications, as Dolohov removed the remains of his shirt and set the knife lightly, almost caressingly against Alan's pale flesh.

The cuts burned, whether by a simple trick of pain, or some deeper spell or potion, Alan didn't know. He just felt himself breathing quick and shallow after some indeterminate time during which he wished he could forget the feeling of steel digging into his flesh, of the goddamn helplessness where his hands were pinned so damn easily, digging into his back. His shirt was gone, his skin covered in a thin sheen of his own blood. Struggling only made the cuts go deeper. Dolohov shifted; Alan kept his eyes tightly shut and tried not to think about it, to just not think at all right then, but felt inordinately grateful when instead of Dolohov continuing, Voldemort spoke once more.

“Dolohov, you've done well. Give his wand here. Macnair ...”

Alan breathed a shallow relief as Dolohov reluctantly stood and pocketed his knife, removing the tie on Alan's hands as he backed off. Alan forced the pain back and scrambled to brace himself once more against the headstone. He remembered that name; a Macnair had

been a friend of Malfoy's he'd tried to bring into the school third year ... something to do with the hippogriff. He'd been with the Disposal section of the Ministry, Alan was sure ...

A thickset man stepped out of the ring, bowing deeply to Voldemort and then hesitating before walking closer. Alan calmed himself, trying to get his body to working for him properly, ignoring the burning pain that covered his chest, and by the time Macnair was closer, closer than he needed to be to use a wand, Alan felt secure in being able to at least make another good statement. Macnair stepped into range, and Alan kicked Macnair hard in the bollocks, hard enough that he overbalanced and fell against the headstone behind him again, hard enough that Macnair made a pained whine and sat down firmly. Alan sat at the bottom of the headstone and laughed bitterly. The Death Eaters shifted, muttering angrily, and Macnair finally recovered enough to glare, and pulled his wand.

"Crucio!" He growled.

Alan curled back into the headstone, keening fitfully as he blanked to anything but the pain, trying to pull away from it, to leave the source, but it was sourceless, raking his mind and body until there was no awareness beyond fighting for something to hold onto in the midst of the overwhelming, drowning pain. He fell – he knew he fell over, he didn't know why – and then began grasping at the ground beneath him as he writhed to make it stop, clawing at the ground and finally giving a rasping scream, trying to curl upon himself again. The pain ended, and someone grabbed his raw shoulder to haul him to his feet. Still incoherent, Alan tried to pull away, grabbing at the arm holding him and trying to claw his way free. His struggles made his shoulder scream in pain, pain he tried to struggle away from without thinking. Someone slapped him, and he choked off his screams, subsiding shakily as he tried to clear his wavering vision. Thin, skeletal fingers grabbed his chin and Alan swallowed as he saw red eyes again, unable to stop the shiver of fear that physically wracked his body. Voldemort smiled.

"Are you done being a fool, Alan, or do you still need to learn?"

Alan couldn't remember where this argument had started, and he remained still, watching Voldemort for any sign of what would come next, what pain he would face now. His lack of response made Voldemort smile, and Alan's scar burst into scalding pain as he felt his mind simply crumple as something ran roughshod over him. But it was just the shield he'd erected being thrown down as Voldemort forced his way into Alan's mind. Alan shivered uncontrollably, and Voldemort rifled through his memories, turning over each, seeking ... seeking ... but Alan had no clue what he was looking for, and couldn't remember if he should fear him finding it or not. As Voldemort continued to look, he seemed unaware of the tightly locked storm imaged at the back of Alan's mind, passing over it without thought, and pulled out with a deep feeling of dissatisfaction. His eyes, when Alan could see again, still held onto Alan's own gaze, and he sighed, turning Alan's face to each side and finally his hand traced around Alan's right eye.

"I never saw this when I encountered you before ... never saw that I left such a mark on you when you were a child."

Alan flinched as Voldemort held his eye open, and drew his finger down the knotted scar bisecting his vision on that side. He could hardly tell it was happening amidst the constant pain he was experiencing. Finally Voldemort let go of his face, and Alan almost collapsed completely, panting in exhaustion and pain. He almost couldn't feel his arm anymore; his chest was blessedly numb. Whoever was holding him – he couldn't remember anymore – let go and he fell bonelessly to the ground, unable and unwilling to fight to keep his feet. The fall had made him feel nauseous, and he gasped as he struggled to keep his bile down. His ears were ringing, and he barely noticed Macnair's feet – that's who it had been – walk away, and another come over and stand by him, closer than was needed for curses and spells.

His warning was a bare whistle in the air before pain raced across his back, throwing him forward. Alan cried out and barely caught himself, turning back to see a Death Eater, masked and unidentifiable, raise his cane again to strike. Alan couldn't move in time, and the next blow forced him to the ground. Alan tried to get up, but stopped when he was struck again. He was hit again, twice more, prompting a muffled

whimper, but Alan didn't try to get up again, didn't try to roll away, afraid of what would happen ... Whoever it was hit him again until he screamed, several blows later, his raw chest burning against the ground. This was apparently satisfactory, and the man stepped back and drew his wand, leaving Alan to try to curl up once more. It was useless. The first spell completely dislocated his left arm from shoulder to wrist, and then his senses bled into convulsions of the unforgiving pain of the Cruciatus once more.

When it lifted, he was staring blankly at glinting stars, unthinking, unfeeling. He felt like he was wrapped in cotton, and while he knew it wasn't real, he desperately wished it was. He whimpered as a hand touched his right shoulder, and gasped when someone else grabbed the other, unwelcome feelings he couldn't place jarring through the cottony barriers. He was pulled roughly to his feet, but the men held on and didn't let go, a minor blessing since Alan was quite certain he'd be unable to keep his feet without them. Then again, he didn't really want to face anybody at this exact moment and staring into Voldemort's gleaming red eyes one too many times that evening left him both incoherent, and fatalistically uncaring. And at the moment, it was a bad combination with his lack of sense.

Alan blinked blankly at the face before him and said the first thought that drifted into his mind. "Your nose looks like you got it beaten into your face, sir."

Voldemort's face gained an ugly cast, and Alan choked as his senses exploded into white starbursts. It was a long moment before he could register what had really happened – nothing more than a slap – but after that time, Alan gazed dazedly back at Voldemort, almost without seeing him. It was with a complete feeling of detachment that he managed to stand enough that he didn't fall when the Death Eaters let him go, but he swayed drunkenly in place. Voldemort smiled indulgingly, and, when Alan didn't respond, walked up to him. Alan stared blankly at his chest, his thoughts still too sluggish to respond to anything as though it were real. Amused, Voldemort took Alan's right hand and pressed Harry's wand into it, curling his hand around it as he turned and walked away.

"If this will do you any good, boy, see that you use it properly. Perhaps you would still like to duel me?"

Voldemort's arrogant voice echoed around the graveyard, and the Death Eaters chortled grimly. Alan was still dazed, unthinking but for the wand curled in his hands. His thoughts were slow, but he knew it wasn't his wand, and wasn't he not supposed to use someone else's wand? But in his pocket, there ... something was wrong, he couldn't remember what, but he couldn't use his wand. But in the other pocket, Alan knew there was something useful of his but he knew he wasn't supposed to use it unless he was willing to live with what it could do ... but he couldn't think of what it could do right then, but he knew – he didn't know how, but he knew – that using it right now would probably be all that he could do.

Shakily Alan watched Voldemort stare at him, unhearing what taunts he might throw his way, and he awkwardly placed Harry's wand in his left hand. He couldn't grasp it though, and he dropped it. Alan crouched to pick it back up, awkwardly sliding it into his left pocket without looking, and pulling out in its stead the gun given him by his godfather from... somewhere. The Death Eaters murmured, and Alan began to shake as he remembered, slowly, that his life was in danger, that he was fighting to not die, and, rather ridiculously he thought, he only barely remembered that he could only really fight with his pistol – Harry's wand would be useless, he'd never be able to muster the strength to cast any proper spells.

"Alan, are you deciding you want this ended now?" Voldemort crooned.

Alan flinched from his voice, and he fought down his budding panic to breath deeply and calmly, steadyng himself. He didn't have a choice. If he wanted to live, he had to get back to the portkey and hope like Hell that it would take him back ... if it didn't, he'd have to see if he could spell it himself, and with Harry's wand as his only option, and the Death Eaters on all sides, that was a bit of a pipe dream that he could do so. But first, he needed Voldemort down at least for the time being. If Voldemort was against him, he didn't have a snowball's chance in Hell.

As Voldemort raised his wand, Alan moved, copying the motion, and raising his gun – a real pistol with live ammo, if aimed right it would kill and he was hoping like Hell for it – aimed at his chest, and fired. The recoil made him scream through clenched teeth as his shoulder jolted, his aim thrown off. Voldemort tried to shield and the bullet went through unimpeded, striking his chest and making him scream as a spray of blood left his back. The gun was loaded with hollowpoints, which went in small, and took a chunk out the back as the bullet expanded upon impact. The Death Eater's shouted in surprise, and Alan gritted his teeth through the wavering pain and aimed behind Voldemort, shooting again. He didn't see who was struck, but whomever it was crumpled around their gut and collapsed limply.

Around them, the Death Eaters milled in panic, completely confused by the damage done by his gun. Alan didn't wait to see what they were doing, he turned and ran to where he could remember the cup being, shouldering past two Death Eaters. One grabbed his shoulder to stop him. Alan panicked, turned, and pressed the barrel of his gun beneath one's chin and fired. The Death Eater gave a choked gasp as he seemed to just faint in place. Blood trickled from his nose and ears, and some ran down the barrel onto Alan's hand before the man collapsed limply to the ground. The Death Eater behind him let go in shock and confusion, and Alan stopped himself from thinking, and ran again, seeing the shining gold and hearing the Death Eaters behind him pick themselves up and turn after his fleeing form. Without thinking, Alan dove as spells began, and rolled, losing all thought to the pain in his shoulders, the nausea behind his eyes, and then he rolled into something hard and smooth, and his hand, his aching left hand closed in reflex as his tortured stomach was jerked from behind, and he fell into the rushing wind and tunnel feeling as he left behind the bloody ground.

A/N: Well. What do you think of the cliffie?

Also, just to ensure no offence: Geoffrey's comment was simply frustration, not racism on my or his part. And the girl may not have heard him correctly ... Thank you for reading! Please review? If I get over ten reviews for this chapter by next Thursday, I might update the next chapter a week early ...

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-five

Landing was agony, crashing into the ground on his painful shoulders, and Alan stifled another scream into choked moans. He lay without trying to move again, waiting with his eyes shut for the agony to pass, before someone touched his forehead gently, and a soft voice brought him to open his eyes despite the pain. He couldn't understand a word they were saying, and when he looked up he found himself staring into glowing white eyes in Koreol's face. He was speaking in some language Alan didn't know, but after he fell silent Alan felt himself go blessedly numb before Koreol pulled him into a sitting position and held him against his chest, hiding his face. Alan couldn't remember why he was doing so, although he knew it served a purpose, but with his body no longer distracting him, he could hear an argument going on not very far from him at all.

"What the Hell are you thinking, Dumbledore! You don't need to send anybody anywhere – you've got a fine source of information once Alan is feeling better. He'll answer questions; I can get a pensive memory from him once he's in the hospital wing, I'll leave him with his father here in fucking Great Britain, but if you suggest Severus turn spy for you one more time, I'm hauling ass out of here so fast I hope your beard chokes you as your head spins! And Severus will be coming with me!"

"Severus is a fine spy –"

"He was until he sired Alan, you fucking moron! Alan wouldn't fucking matter if Severus wasn't a fucking spy, and I think it's abundantly clear that Severus is your fucking spy, not Riddle's. Stop being so god-be-damned thick-headed and get your sense out of your fucking ass!"

At about the third cuss word, Alan could tell they'd been at it a while. Geoffrey was usually a lot more careful than that in public. Alan felt Koreol sigh – a definite sign of irritation, as breathing was not required for him save to speak – and then Koreol stood, Alan's completely limp body cradled carefully in his arms, the right side of his face with his scarred eye hidden from view. When he turned, Dumbledore and Geoffrey fell silent, Geoffrey's hands convulsing

angrily as he fought down his trembling fury. After a moment, Geoffrey walked over and touched Alan's forehead carefully. Alan found that his face wasn't completely numb, and he smiled tremulously before sighing and speaking softly.

"Sev'rus can't go back. T- V- He's angry with 'im." Alan barely managed to speak, and felt a tremor of fear at the thought of ... his name. Alan reassured himself he'd go back to being an ass about it later, but not right now. Not while he still hurt.

Geoffrey sighed. "I know, pup. It's alright. You trust Mrs. Pomfrey to take care of you right now? Koreol promised to stay with you in the meantime. I'm ..."

"Fucking pissed?" Alan whispered playfully.

Geoffrey huffed and stroked Alan's hair gently. "Yeah, fucking pissed. Royally fucking pissed. We'll have someone up there at all times." Geoffrey turned to go, and Alan squeaked lightly.

"Geoffrey? Jeff!" Alan coughed after he spoke, and Koreol pulled him closer as Geoffrey turned worriedly, and made a soothing noise.

"Alan, calm down, please. What is it, what do you need?"

Alan widened his eyes; he really didn't want to cry no matter how worried he was. "My – my wand." He whispered. "It's ... it's ... right pocket. Please." Alan turned his head away as he finished. He would not cry.

Geoffrey blinked and gently pulled it out, biting his lip as he saw the break. He held it gently and leaned over to kiss Alan's forehead. "Alright pup. I'll get it fixed for you, okay?"

Alan nodded slowly and let him go, curling back against Koreol and allowing the vampire to walk inside with him, the crowd parting with worried murmurs for him and his battered burden and his glowing white eyes. Alan was watching only passingly whom they went by, and he hadn't expected to have his eye catch Harry's for a moment. Harry's eyes widened, his mouth open and face plainly scared. Alan

closed his eyes and tucked back against Koreol. He'd send Andrew for him when he was feeling better. Right now, sleep was tugging at him and slowly his gaze began to darken and fade while he was painfully tired and sore. He didn't want to wake up to this in the morning, and sitting warmly and feeling so safe and painless in Koreol's arms he allowed himself to think that everything would be alright in the daylight, and that everything would just have fixed itself and he wouldn't be in so much fucking pain ...

||||

When Alan woke up again, he wished fervently he could go back to sleep. His body ached, faintly compared to what it had been before, but uncomfortable still and aside from the pain were the memories of what had happened, which he knew would not be left alone. Indeed, when he turned his head, he found himself looking at Koreol and Geoffrey, both seated beside him. Both were giving strong indications that they were furious. Geoffrey was turning pages in his books far quicker than he could be reading them and with a contained violence. Koreol was still as stone, but his eyes remained glowing faintly white, and his hands were tightly gripped where he'd folded his arms. There were faint murmurs outside the curtain, and it wasn't long before Koreol turned his gaze to Alan and stood, nudging Geoffrey as he did so and bringing Geoffrey out of his book with a snarl. Koreol's expression was blank, but Geoffrey quickly dropped his head, and turned to the bedside table and its contents as Koreol stepped out of the curtain for a moment.

"Here." He thrust a clear potion at Alan, who looked at it without expression and Geoffrey rolled his eyes. "Your dad made it special. Drink. It'll help. He said it helped him all the time those years ago, so go figure."

Alan nodded carefully and sat up, taking the potion and drinking it down carefully, ignoring the strange feeling of tasting what felt like cotton in liquid form. Once he'd finished, however, the bone-deep ache that had been dogging him slowly began to fade away. Alan closed his eyes to enjoy it, and then smiled when he heard Koreol talking lowly with Severus. He turned to watch them come in and felt mildly distracted when he realized he was seeing out of both eyes

again. He had never figured out why that worked the way it did; the only thing Koreol could figure was that it was completely unconscious, and the amount of strength required also meant some leaked into the very interesting side effects it had on his vision, such as his ability to ‘see’ magic like watching wavering heat. It apparently rescinded when he needed his entire magical reserve, but that seemed to take some doing.

“Alan.” Severus acknowledged. Alan pulled out of his thoughts and smiled brightly at him. Severus didn’t smile back, but he sat on the edge of Alan’s bed and took hold of his hand. “Did the potion help?”

Alan nodded, and after a moment of indecision pulled gently on Severus’ hand. He wanted his father closer, but couldn’t think of how to ask. Severus looked just as lost at the gesture, and Alan looked down slowly. Severus hesitated again, and then pulled Alan over, slowly embracing him. Alan gratefully laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, wrapping his arms around his back and noticing that there was no pain in his right shoulder. He remained silent for a moment before speaking up.

“Dad …” He said hesitantly. He didn’t often call him that, but … “What fixed my shoulder so fast? I can’t have been out really long and … it was …” Alan didn’t know how to say the Dark magic shouldn’t have healed so completely.

Severus shifted uncomfortably. “The headmaster’s phoenix came in while Madam Pomfrey was working on you, and donated some of his tears to healing your shoulder. Madam Pomfrey was most relieved
...”
...

“The damage had been bad, Alan.” Koreol added baldly. “Madam Pomfrey wasn’t sure she could get the muscle healed completely. You shouldn’t have any problems now, though.”

Alan nodded against his father’s chest, and simply stayed where he was, wanting reassurance that he was back with people he trusted, who would keep him safe. Thinking about it … his body still ached when he returned to the memories, and he did not want to remember the pain. However, a cough came from behind the screens, and

Geoffrey swore under his breath. Alan wasn't looking, but he heard the curtain move, and Severus shifted awkwardly. When Alan moved to sit back at the pillow, however, he held on, and helped him turn so he could still lean against him and see who had joined the others at his bedside. Alan was not pleased to see Dumbledore there, but felt mildly relieved to see him followed by James Potter and Sirius Black. Whether the two Marauders were jackasses or not, they were devoted aurors who understood the danger posed by Voldemort. And somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew they needed to be there because there was something in what he had learned that they would know when no one else would, but what was currently escaping him. It must have been something Harry had mentioned ages ago ...

"Good evening, Alan." Dumbledore greeted. "I trust you are recovering well? You've slept into tomorrow. It's past dinnertime, now."

Alan nodded slowly, leaning deeply against Severus and watching the headmaster with sharp eyes. "You want to know what happened, I suppose?"

Dumbledore nodded. "You may start wherever you are comfortable, Alan."

Alan paused, but neither Geoffrey nor Koreol complained that he couldn't tell, that he shouldn't. He knew he couldn't get out of it, that it was a blessing he'd been allowed the time he had (most likely because he fainted), but he didn't want to remember. He wanted to let the pain fade into the back of his mind where it couldn't hurt him again. It wouldn't happen. It wasn't fair, it never would be, but they needed to hear and know what they were facing now. Alan took a deep breath, and chose to begin farther back than he otherwise would.

"It was V—" Alan's throat froze, and he coughed; fighting back a shudder and a memory ache in his face. "The Dark Lord." He settled for, his mouth twisting with distaste, and his hands shaking. He clenched them into fists, and Severus gently worked them loose, placing his own hand there for Alan to clutch. "He admitted to entering me in the tournament. Said he had one of his servants sneak

into Hogwarts and do so. I don't know how he got in, but he called the man Wormtail."

"Wormtail?" James started. "That little rat! He was there?"

Alan swallowed and nodded, feeling mildly better. They knew who that was. Good. "He was apparently the one to enter my name. He was also the one to turn the cup into a- a portkey. I think he imperiused Karkaroff to do it. He probably sabotaged the second task, too, but they ... didn't bring it up. He got himself a shiny new silver hand now as well; I think I know why but I'm not sure. Right hand, I think."

"What happened at the third task, Alan?"

Alan bit back the desire to complain about the obstacles in the maze. That wasn't what he was talking about, and he knew it. He just ... didn't want to return to the graveyard. Didn't want to remember the torture.

"I got to the cup and didn't have much time to look at it. There was a spider opposite, so I just ran and grabbed it, and it –it was a portkey. Took me into a graveyard, I don't know where. I got stunned shortly after arriving. When I woke up, I was looking at Vol—" another spasm, "the Dark Lord. He went into a monologue about himself, offered to make me his heir, told of how he'd been ..." Alan looked up at Dumbledore and felt he couldn't leave it out, even if he wanted to "vanquished, I suppose, after trying to kill me because of a prophecy. How he was so little afterwards, weak and hidden." Alan shrugged. "I told him I wasn't interested in being his, didn't want some tasteless tattoo. He – cursed me. The Cruciatus." Alan shivered and looked away. He'd never really thought much of what a curse that only caused pain could do. He supposed after a time anything became unbearable. Remembering made his skin shiver and sweat.

"How did he return, child?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Alan bristled at the endearment, irritation washing away the memories, and he felt his face blank into indifference. "Flesh of the

servant, Bone of the father, Blood of the enemy, he said. An old Dark ritual.”

Geoffrey growled something vile under his breath, and Koreol sighed. “Where?” He asked. Alan didn’t ask him to clarify; he held out his left arm and showed the long, straight cut from his elbow to his wrist. It was nothing more than a shiny line of pale skin, going down his arm, rather than across as all the other cuts from Dolohov did. The cuts done by spell weren’t healed fully yet, simply cleaned and scabbed. He supposed it was because they were Dark in origin. At least the knife cuts were gone; thank Merlin, those done with plain steel. The ones that had covered most of his skin.

Dumbledore looked intently at the line on his arm, and then back at Alan. “What happened after he … ‘monologued’?”

Alan gave him a cold, hard stare in return and waited, not to bother him, but to gather his thoughts on how to answer. Bothering him was a bonus.

“They tortured me.” He said baldly, blandly, with none of the feeling that swelled inside him, disguising the cold fear that made him feel painfully nauseous, as though his stomach was trying to tie itself into a small knot, as though if that could become smaller, they wouldn’t notice him and the pain would go away. “I fought back. Got away.”

Severus raised his free hand, the one not being held in Alan’s white-knuckled grip, and rested it on Alan’s shoulder, pulling him closer as Alan withdrew until he didn’t want to see the others looking at him and fell against Severus, pressing into someone warm and trusted. He held on with a fierceness born of desperation to avoid the horrible memories and clenched his teeth impotently to stifle the threatening sob.

Behind him, he heard those that were there shifting, and he stiffened as he felt someone reach towards his back. Someone else – Geoffrey, most like – stood and his guess was confirmed as Geoffrey spoke.

“I do think what happened is something more of the concern of Mrs. Pomfrey, and less yours. If you’d like to hear, you can bring her over

and we'll discuss it for his healing, and not for your sadistic curiosity." He bit off the end, and Alan could well imagine his fierce expression.

"Very well, then." Dumbledore allowed blandly. "I'll got see her over here, then." Alan heard him walk away, and sighed as he leaned his head onto Severus' shoulder. He paused, and then gave up his pride to sound like a child for a moment.

"Do I have to ... talk about it?" His voice trembled slightly, but despite his dislike of the reaction, he didn't fight it. He didn't have the energy for it, and he just wanted to abdicate his worries and concerns to someone else, someone more capable than he was. Severus pulled him closer and didn't answer; Geoffrey, behind him, took the lead.

"Alan ... yes. We need to know, because if there were specific curses you were afflicted with, we need to make sure they're gone for good. And it really will help. We're all here for you, Alan. Your father, me, Koreol ... once Pomfrey's looked you over once more, I think she'll let Andrew in if there's nothing that's particularly worrisome."

Alan pressed his face harder into Severus' chest, and bit his lip gently. Madam Pomfrey shuffled through the curtains, and Alan sat up before she even spoke. Before he turned away, however, Severus caught his chin and gently pressed a kiss to his forehead before letting him sit back. Alan gave him a tremulous smile for the effort, and then turned to face the interrogation of the mediwitch.

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Three days after the disastrous end of the third task, Harry and Neville were sitting in the library after Neville had forced Harry out of their dorm once more. Harry hadn't wanted to sit still, and only Neville was fully aware of the cause. Neville had passed it off as concern for his father, and the very vague reassurances he'd given them while passing through the school but after telling Harry firmly four times in the day after that he could not go into the Hospital wing, it was clear Harry was worried about Alan. However, with their friendship being hidden, he wasn't even capable of asking to visit, especially with Alan's guardians standing watch at all hours. The only time Neville got Harry to calm down and sit still was when he told him to meditate,

which he'd taken to advising more often than not. A telling sign of Harry's mental state was that he had only complained about the orders once.

It was late evening now, and there was not another soul in the library with them; they'd probably be kicked out any minute. Harry was deep into his trance, and Neville was reading a book he'd borrowed from Harry, his mind deep into the discussion of poisons – it was a very involved book, one of the illegal American ones as well. It wasn't five more minutes before Harry pulled out of his trance, and looked across at Neville and then tilted his head to the side curiously as he looked past him, on a pale figure he could see leaning against the bookshelves. Neville saw his change in attention and looked as well, his posture sharpening at the company. Harry, however, wasn't worried. He recognized Andrew from the World Cup, and gave a gentle nod his direction, indicating a seat at the table gently. Andrew paused, but took the offered seat with a frown.

Harry yawned, and gave him a curious look. "What are you doing looking for me, Andrew?" Andrew darted a glance at Neville and Harry blinked his surprise before shrugging. "Neville knows Alan's my friend." Harry stopped after that, feeling his frustration well up, and needing to fight it back down before he could speak. Andrew didn't seem to notice as his own gaze dropped to where he was currently fiddling with his hands.

"Koreol told me I could fetch one of Alan's friends and bring them in to visit this evening if I wanted. I trust him to keep silent about who I choose to bring, and I think Alan would like to see you, Harry."

Harry bit his lip. He really wanted to see Alan, but he wasn't so sure how much he wanted to trust this Koreol. He didn't know who it was, and he also didn't want to leave Neville like that, although he knew Neville wasn't having any of his current problems ...

"I'm willing to say you're still studying with me, Harry." Neville offered without looking up from his book at all. "And since we studied through supper, I can then make a trip to the kitchens, as you certainly weren't hungry at any point this evening."

"But I don't know ... is Koreol trustworthy?" Harry bit his lip.

Andrew's head came up abruptly. "Of course he is!" Andrew snapped. He paused, and then shrugged awkwardly. "Sorry, you don't know him. He's my mentor. Um, the vampire who came to get me and Alan away from Crouch at the World Cup?"

Harry blinked, and then nodded slowly. "I suppose so. I didn't know."

Andrew just shrugged it off again, his movements stiff. "S'alright, s'alright. I'm just ... I don't like all this. Don't like it at all. Haven't seen Alan more'n once yet, and so ... I really don't like it."

"Well," Harry put a small smile on and closed the book he'd been pretending to read. "Can we go, then?"

Andrew sprang to his feet and nodded. "Alan says you've got an invisibility cloak? A damn good one, he says?"

"Yeah?" Harry nodded and patted his bag.

"Put it on, eh?" Andrew asked. "Makes me have less to worry about and explain. Just don't be surprised when Koreol notices you're there, and don't be menacing about it. You'll lose against him, flat."

Harry nodded and quickly pulled his cloak out, pulling it on and disappearing beneath. He followed as Andrew led the way out, and strode up to the hospital wing, not caring in the least as several eyes followed his path, and others made aborted motions to approach. His quick stride left them behind, and left Harry struggling to keep up. At the next cross of hallways, the left turn leading to the hospital wing, Andrew paused and looked lost for a moment. Harry was grateful; it allowed him a chance to catch up and catch his breath. Andrew had long legs! Andrew only paused a moment, and then apparently remembered and took the corner. Harry caught the look of amusement on his face before he pulled ahead though, and spent the next few halls cursing the sadistic vampire brat. However, Andrew did lead them into the hospital wing, and once there he slowed and became solemn again. Harry kept right at his shoulder as he walked back to the curtained bed at the far end, passing the two beds beside

it where Geoffrey and Severus were both asleep. Andrew glanced around the ward and then glanced over Harry's head, speaking,

"Wait a moment, will you?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but slipped past the screens and disappeared for a moment. Harry heard nothing, not a word of discussion, but he waited patiently for a conclusion to come out. When the screens stirred again, however, it wasn't Andrew who stepped out but a different, taller blonde man with the same white-gold eyes and pale skin. He glanced around the ward once before bringing his eyes back to roughly where Harry was standing beneath the invisibility cloak, and he frowned.

"Please take the hood down for a moment."

Harry obeyed and looked up at him, obscenely proud he could do so without shaking. Logically, he knew Koreol was Andrew's mentor and completely trusted by Alan in all things. Unfortunately, he also knew that Koreol was a very old, very powerful vampire and it was deeply ingrained to be scared of a predator that you knew could kill you very easily. Being friends and comfortable with Andrew was different than being with Koreol, but Harry was willing to face up to him in order to be allowed to see Alan.

Koreol only stared at him for several moments before he stood back and pulled open the screen to let him through. Harry gave him a small smile and darted in, pulling off his invisibility cloak and stepping up to look at Alan on his bed. Harry's chest tightened at the sight. Alan was sitting cross-legged at the head of his bed, much as he had the last time Harry had visited him in the hospital wing, and much as he had then, Alan looked tired and drawn. But the largest difference now was that Alan looked more than just tired; he looked scared. He hadn't been scared after facing the basilisk. Harry couldn't imagine what the difference was, but he stood silently and watched him until Alan looked from Andrew and back to him. A small smile warmed his face, and he beckoned Harry closer. It was with a faint laugh that Harry walked up there, and then, checking with a look, hopped onto the bed and sat facing him. It brought a wider smile to Alan's face, and Harry couldn't help but ask,

“What happened?”

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It seemed obscene that it was easier to tell Harry everything than it had been to talk to Dumbledore and Pomfrey, Alan thought, but it didn’t change the fact that it was. Maybe it was the history between them. Every time he’d been in danger of life and limb before while at Hogwarts, Harry had been there. The basilisk, Quirrel … both times then he’d followed or dragged Harry with him, and Harry hadn’t pulled back or stopped. He’d plunged headlong before or beside him, and sharing the trauma now seemed all the easier for it. His presence almost made him forget that Koreol was sitting calmly at the edge of the screen, and Andrew just stood to the side and listened.

However, the biggest difference Alan noticed was when he found his mouth moving and talking about the torture without even thinking about whether to share it with Harry or not. His body couldn’t take the move into the subject without the clinical dissociation he’d forced when reporting to Madam Pomfrey, and he began to shake and cry. Harry moved from facing him to crawl beside him on the bed, awkwardly pulling him into a hug, but he didn’t stop talking about it. He didn’t look up from Harry’s shoulder until he finished, and once he was out of the pain of the memories, he breathed and waited. He couldn’t believe he’d told him all of it, but it was done. Once he felt calmer, Alan pulled back and looked up to Harry, waiting to see horror on his face, or disgust, or something of the two. He found both, but before each of them, Harry was baldly angry. Alan bit his lip to control his desire to burst into hysterical laughter, something he was sure was a response to the trauma but an unwanted one, and shrugged before giving Harry a wry smile.

“I don’t think you’ll like hearing this, but you and your dad both react the same way to this.” Alan remarked. Harry blinked, and shrugged.

“For this? I’m not surprised. This … disgusts me.” Harry growled. Alan couldn’t suppress a flinch, and Harry tightened his arm around Alan’s shoulder. “That they could do that to another person. That someone could be so … crass as to hurt someone else for … for that.

No reason, no fucking real legitimate reason. I'm sure it made sense to their twisted minds, but it's no fucking reason."

Alan leaned against Harry's shoulder and didn't respond, grateful though he was for the defence. His perspective seemed to be righting itself as Harry spoke, the frantic, terrified emotions he'd been suffering through clearing like smoke before wind as Harry spoke in his defence. Once Harry fell silent, Alan sat up and gave him an awkward smile. Harry smiled back, and tentatively scooted from his side back to facing him. Alan smiled what felt like a real smile back, and bent to pick at the sheets.

"Fudge doesn't believe that Vol-demort's back." Alan offered, tripping only once over the name. He looked up and was rewarded to see Harry gape for a moment, before he pulled back with a snarl, pulling an expletive and attaching it to the minister in a way his mother never told him to. Alan raised his eyebrow, and Harry subsided, running his hand through his flyaway hair.

"I'm not really surprised, though." Harry grumbled. "He wouldn't. From what my dad tells me, he's weak, and he doesn't want to get off his tubby little ass and deal with an actual war. And it will be war if Voldemort's back." Alan nodded. "What evidence does he think is bloody missing?" Harry asked. "What more does he need? Deaths? A Death Eater on his doorstep?"

Alan snorted. "He's got that everyday, and invites him in for tea and crumpets to boot, telling him to wash the blood off in the sink and down the drain before he has to notice it."

Harry fell silent and looked back at Alan with a frustrated cast. "If he's not going to do anything about it, we're in deep shit."

Alan nodded silently back, and shrugged helplessly where he sat. "What more can we do? Dumbledore will be doing something. Geoffrey said he's going to be leaving me with Severus while he returns to America for a few things and then he'll come back."

"Will ... your godfather remain there?"

Alan paused, and then shrugged. “I’d prefer that he would, but … it’s his choice. I don’t think he will. This is the third time I’ve been screwed over, you remember.”

Harry offered a small smile. “It would be nice to meet him, you know.”

Alan smiled wanly back, and leaned back into the headboard. Harry got to his knees and leaned forward to give Alan another short hug.

“I’m glad you’re alright, Alan.” Harry whispered. He leaned back and looked forlornly at the cut on Alan’s cheek below his right eye before he focused on Alan’s gaze again. “Get better soon, alright?”

Alan smiled weakly, and watched as Harry grabbed his cloak and disappeared, leaving quickly. Koreol watched him go, and then looked back at Alan.

“I’m glad you told him everything.” Koreol murmured.

Alan coloured and looked away. “It … just seemed to come out.”

“It will help, having told someone. You didn’t really tell it when we asked it of you, but I knew you wouldn’t.”

Alan felt ready to bristle, but he firmly reminded himself that Koreol was very old, very experienced. He’d probably been through similar situations, seen people break and people heal more times than he could count. Alan curled around his knees once more, and glanced over at Andrew hesitantly.

“Thank you for bringing him, Andrew.” Alan whispered.

Andrew brushed a hand over Alan’s shoulder, hesitating at Alan’s minute flinch at the contact, and letting his hand fall away. “No problem.” He allowed. “Anything to help you.”

Alan nodded and let his chin fall onto his knees, staring blankly at the end of the bed and the curtain beyond.

"You are feeling much better, Alan." Koreol reassured him. Alan looked at him with empty eyes, and Koreol smiled thinly. "Voldemort. That was the first time you'd used his name since you came back."

Alan felt his gaze blank once more, but for a different reason. He had said the name hadn't he? And he'd felt nothing. He'd just been telling Harry about it, just ... talking. Alan let his cheek touch his knees again and smiled faintly as it all slipped away.

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Alan wasn't pleased to be riding the Hogwarts Express at the end of the year, but he supposed that it was alright. He sat with Daphne, Blaise, and the rest of his coterie, and mostly stared silently out the window as the others played Exploding Snap and other such games, a few wary glances straying his way but none of them intruding. The Slytherins understood a private pain. Chances are, a lot of them were caught up in their own thoughts more than the games they played anyways. Many of them would be striding a fine line once they returned home. The only good thing about it was that Geoffrey had gotten him his wand back, whole once more. It was a small blessing, but nothing against the chaos the world was balanced upon.

Dumbledore had announced the onset of the war at the Leaving Feast, his conviction that Voldemort had returned. He managed to make Alan sound like a coincidental victim as Voldemort had planned it: a power play, of defying Dumbledore's power over the school and the light, of taking a child under his care and twisting them out and hurting them to declare war. Turning a school victory into a bell of war. He'd made Alan to be a heroic victim picking himself back up after the attack. Alan hadn't liked it but when the option was victim or hero, he'd choose the former. It was an easier title to shed.

Halfway through the ride, Alan left the compartment to stretch his legs and visit theloo, leaving with his hand touching the small bag Fudge had left behind when he'd denied Voldemort's existence: a thousand galleons prize money. It was something Alan most certainly did not want. He didn't get very far in his distraction before Malfoy stepped into his path and glared at him.

"Are you still holding to you stupid ideas, Prince? Your conviction in being a ridiculous American."

"Are you still convinced marrying your cousins is the best way to go about breeding yourselves like dogs?" Alan drawled. He held his temper with an iron fist, because if he let go, Draco would be howling in pain on the floor of the compartment, and Alan didn't think he'd let the curses go. He could still remember Lucius' voice among the Death Eaters, and he would not be like that man. "Just get out of my way, Draco." Alan growled, anger trembling in his voice.

Malfoy, however, heard not anger but fear, and stepped closer. Alan refused to bring out his wand, and forced himself to take a step back. He was shaking, now, with rage, with memories, with fear, and Malfoy smiled grimly. His temper trembled on the brink of murder, and then Alan flinched as a jet of light passed his head, striking down Malfoy as another set came, passing him by on all sides, and sending Malfoy and his barely arrived bookends to the floor. Alan turned, and found the Weasley twins, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville out of their compartment and aiming all wands past him to the goons on the floor. From the other end of the hall, Lucille, Daphne and Blaise were brandishing their own and regarding Malfoy and his with disdain. Alan licked his lips carefully and nodded slowly to the Gryffindors, finding his breath to speak after a few moments.

"Thank you. I don't ... didn't ..."

"No need." Harry growled, and his mouth twitched into a wry smile. "Doesn't hurt to practice hexing Death Eaters when they're young. We'll have to deal with the older ones soon enough, and since you clearly weren't up to that fight ..." Harry trailed off, and Alan sneered at him, and gave a mocking bow. He paused, however, and regarded the bag of money in his pocket. Thinking him done with the discussion, Harry and his friends slipped back into their compartment, and the twins moved to follow. Alan looked at Malfoy and the others for another moment, and remembered Harry's tales of their jokes. Alan stepped forward and grabbed the shoulder of the nearest one. The boy stopped, and Alan said nothing; he simply thrust the bag into his hand, and raised an eyebrow, turning and striding away without

waiting for an answer. He didn't heed their calls to stop, and rejoined his friends without a backwards glance. Let them think what they like.

A/N: Yikes, I almost forgot to update. Here it is, last chapter of fourth year. Next update will start fifth. I stand by the statement of the first chapter to garner more than ten reviews will get an extra update when the tenth hits my mailbox!

Also, I'm considering doing a series of oneshots for this story, of scenes you didn't get to see because of Point of View. If you can think of any you'd like me to consider, I will certainly see about fitting them in. I'm not sure when I'll start posting these, as many of them will contain spoilers, but the oneshots are definite - I've already written a few and have several planned.

Thank you for reading, and thank you very much to everyone who reviewed!

Fire & Napalm

Part IV

The Prince-Who-Lived

Chapter Twenty-six

"What is the fucking point, then, of hanging around Kings Cross for 'extra security' for the last fourteen years if they don't even give us back the power to make arrests and inquiries when we get the first sign of actual trouble showing up again?" James ranted. "Fudge is a complete toe-brained, goat-faced —"James fell silent as he clamped his mouth shut on his next words. He moved on furiously, "Fourteen years of being cautious, and now he refuses to acknowledge anything. They're thinking of dropping the caution completely now! It's absurd! Absolutely bloody fucking barmy!"

"James, sit down!" Lily growled. "And wash your mouth out; your daughter may be upstairs, but get a grip. It's stupid, but doesn't call for that kind of language, and not in front of your kids."

Harry sighed into his arms and watched James settle with a mutinous expression. They were in the kitchen of Grimmauld place; it was boring as Hell. None of the children could go flying while they were there, and their parents refused to leave them home alone at any of the respective family homes, not for the extended absences they were going through. And with them putting all their efforts outside of work into the Order, that meant Harry, Neville, Ron, Hermione and the rest of the Weasley children had spent the last month being shanghaied by Molly Weasley into cleaning the filthy house of Black. Sirius had regarded the whole mess like a being informed he was expected to wrestle a Blast-ended Skrewt, and hadn't yet complained about his work keeping him out of it. They'd found several spots of bundimuns, doxies, dead puffskeins, and then a whole gamut of evil and dangerous gadgets and items. The amount of difficulty they had in cleaning was astronomical, and Harry was not looking forward to the days moving onward except in the sense that they brought him closer to when he could leave and go back to Hogwarts which would hopefully retain its sanctity.

There had been no mention of Alan from Severus, even though Harry knew Alan was remaining with his father. Geoffrey, Koreol and Andrew had returned to America, and while Geoffrey had told them he'd be coming back eventually, there had been no sign of it in the last month. The celebration of his and Neville's birthdays had remained muted in the light of the frantic concerns of their parents about the lingering threat of Death Eaters. The only news that had been brought up so far was a single, small report in yesterday's Daily Prophet tucked in a far back page of a scuffle between a 'lone Death Eater' and several 'upstanding citizens', including Lucius Malfoy. Harry had to wonder just whom the poor mislabelled victim Malfoy had accosted was, and why he had dared use the title Death Eater for them. For Malfoy to call someone that seemed strange; why would he have a problem with one of his 'old crowd' unless ... whoever it was may have been a deserter, or, indeed, possibly even Karkaroff. However, a picture had been taken and the cloaked figure seemed too slight of build to be the disgraced Headmaster of Durmstrang, and the possible considerations were left dangling with no conclusion. The paper had been read and read over until it had lost any interest by all the inhabitants. Across the table, Neville was flipping through 'Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Geneology' with a supreme lack of interest. They were waiting for the next meeting to start, waiting for Dumbledore to arrive, and for them to be banished from the kitchen once more, hoping against hope they'd forget to bespell the door and they'd have another chance with the twin's Extendable Ears ...

The floo flared green, and several present jumped, targeting the fireplace into which Snape's head appeared with a shake and a scowl.

"It's me, Severus, fools. Is the Headmaster in? I have news for him that is of utmost sensitivity and I need him to come through to my house immediately."

"Of course, Severus, but he's not here that I know of. I'll go check the drawing room." Lily stood quickly, and left. James twirled his wand in boredom, brilliant gold sparks lighting the air from its tip. The others settled uncomfortably as Severus' head waited in the flames. Not a minute later, Lily returned with Dumbledore on her heels.

"What is it, Severus?" Dumbledore rumbled.

Severus sighed. "Geoffrey has returned, and he brought with him ... someone you should meet, who has news that I suspect will most interest you. If you can come through ..."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall momentarily. The rest of the Order should be ready for the meeting once I have returned."

"Of course." Severus' head pulled out, and Dumbledore quickly stepped through, disappearing and leaving a fire burning merrily in his wake. Lily and Alice exchanged a look and sighed.

"Alright, this will probably be long, then. Harry, Neville, please go fetch the other children and we'll get you dinner right away."

Harry and Neville sighed before doing as they were bid. None of the others would appreciate this. Whoever was showing up was going to be someone new and exciting, probably full of tales and they wouldn't even get to meet whoever it was.

It was ten minutes later, and the children were still eating, and playing exploding snap to pass the time. Around them, a good portion of the Order waited. The parents of all the children were present, as well as Remus and Sirius, Moody, Nymphadora Tonks who was Sirius' cousin, and Kingsley Shacklebolt as well, another auror and a recommendation of Sirius'. They were all watching the floo warily, disliking the children's presence, but knowing they wouldn't leave quite yet. Harry had been most insistent, and James had caved and let them remain for the time being. Harry supposed James understood their frustration at being left in the dark.

Not long into a second game, the fire flared green again and several wands were aimed at the fire. The first to come through was Dumbledore, who stood and dusted himself off elegantly, smiling at the gathered Order members.

"We'll be having three guests, tonight. They should be coming through now."

Indeed, the fire hadn't returned to red, and another figure stumbled out, brown-haired and cursing faintly. Harry suppressed a grin; it was Geoffrey Alfaerus. It wasn't long after him that Alan stepped promptly out and out of the way, turning back to watch the fire worriedly without even acknowledging the others gathered in the room. Harry felt a suspicion grow, that was tossed aside when much to his surprise, two people came through the floo next, Severus catching his feet easily as his companion, wiry and dark-haired, fell roughly to the floor, catching himself with a muffled oath.

"Get off the floor already; you wouldn't have fallen had you been willing to go through with this. Coming was your idea." Severus snapped at his companion. Said person scrambled to their feet, back to the room, and grumbled loudly,

"Excuse me if I hadn't known a bunch of fucking vigilantes were going to have infested what I considered the perfect hiding place. Excuse me if I have a few people who won't want to see my face. For all the Christ-fucking, bloody numbskulls who I left behind, the last one I want to see –"

"Is standing three feet to your right and hasn't recognized you yet?" Geoffrey drawled. The stranger choked and froze, not daring to move another muscle. This, aside from the lingering British accent in the mostly markless voice of the stranger solidified Harry's suspicion. Sirius, meanwhile, had narrowed his eyes when Geoffrey indicated his position in combination with Alan's godfather's rant. Introductions promised to be interesting. Fortunately, Dumbledore took that hurdle.

"Well, as the main body of our group seem to be here, I would like to make sure you are all known. Alan Prince is the youth who has come here for his own safety now that his house is empty of an adult wizard." Alan snorted, as Severus rolled his eyes. Dumbledore seemed to not notice. "Many of the rest of you have met up with Geoffrey Alfaerus after the World Cup last year, and lastly we have the guest who has come to aid the effort ... I'm not sure I caught your name, and wish to be sure ..." Dumbledore trailed off. Harry heard a mutinous mutter start up before Severus grabbed the dark haired man's shoulder and hauled him around to face the room, which he did reluctantly.

"This is Regulus Black, back from the dead." Severus announced.

The room seemed to freeze. Harry could feel his own incredulity, but as he had known for two years already, he wasn't too put out by the thought. However, he had a good look at Sirius' face, and felt mildly worried for Regulus' health. It seemed almost ironic that his godfather and Alan's were brothers who were rather at odds, but there was little he could do about it. The welcome seemed to be falling apart. Frustrated, Geoffrey stepped forward.

"I'd like to remind you all that Regulus has my full trust; I am satisfied with his turn around, and any insult to him will compound into an insult to the Alfaerus as well."

Neville whistled under his breath as the purebloods in the room winced. Insulting another family was a stupid thing to do that usually resulted in blood feuds. Insulting a family as powerful as the Alfaerus would be a move that would drain everything from a family, and would be present aside the insult to the Blacks who were a vicious enemy to have, weakened in members though they were.

Sirius growled. "How on earth are you alive and what were you doing in America?"

Regulus, minutely relaxed with Geoffrey's defence, shrugged. "It's thanks to Kreacher, I suppose."

He flinched as the room echoed with a crack and Kreacher looked up and saw Regulus. His face spread into massive awe and he seemed ready to cry. Regulus winced, mouthed 'oops', and then smiled wanly.

Kreacher stared at Regulus and whispered hoarsely as though he couldn't believe it. "Master Regulus ... master Regulus is well and has returned to Kreacher and home and his poor mother, sick with grief she was at losing Master Regulus. Master Regulus has returned ..." Kreacher's enraptured face faded and he grabbed his ears and began twisting them painfully, moving louder and louder into a panicked screech. "But poor Kreacher ... no, Kreacher is a failure, Kreacher hasn't done right, and Kreacher has failed the Master!"

Kreacher is a bad elf, and let the filthy mudbloods and blood traitors in, and they stole all the heirlooms and the items and Master Regulus will be so mad—“

Regulus listened, and while he seemed pleased before, his face darkened quickly, becoming worried and angry. When Kreacher began to scream, he stepped forward. “Enough! Be silent and wait.”

Kreacher cut himself off abruptly and stilled his hands on his ears. Regulus waited, and then sighed. “I first want to know if you destroyed my locket. The rest can wait.”

Kreacher grimaced and sank down into a bow, his nose on the floor. “Kreacher failed Master Regulus, Kreacher couldn’t destroy Master’s locket.” Regulus’ face tightened, but Kreacher continued, returning to his wail. “Kreacher tried and punished himself, and tried and punished himself again, and then – and then came the mudbloods and blood traitors, and Kreacher couldn’t stop them with the bad son returning, and they took everything away and Kreacher lost Master Regulus’ locket and had to steal it back and then a filthy thief stole it and took it out of Kreacher’s sight! Kreacher failed the Master, and Kreacher is a horrible failure of an elf. Kreacher FAILED Master Regulus.”

Regulus paled to milk white as Kreacher told him the locket was gone, and he growled, “Enough. Stop, Kreacher now.” Kreacher went silent, snot dripping from his nose and watched Regulus, trembling faintly. Regulus breathed carefully for a moment, and then whispered, “Who took the locket out of the house?”

Kreacher looked up at Regulus as though he were the only person in the room; indeed, Regulus was certainly acting as though that were the case. “Mundungus Fletcher.” Kreacher croaked in a malicious tone; he seemed to be anticipating something. “Mundungus Fletcher’s stolen the Black items, and took off with Master’s locket.”

Regulus’ hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, and he wasn’t the only one, Harry saw, who was furious at this news. Alan’s eyes were wide and angry, and Geoffrey was fingering his wand. Regulus turned to Dumbledore.

"Where is Mundungus Fletcher, Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore sighed. "He should be here, Regulus ... possibly he escaped into the pantry for a smoke, or outside."

Regulus nodded carefully, and then turned back to Kreacher. "Thank you, Kreacher. You did very well in keeping the locket for me even if you could not destroy it. I'm very pleased. If Mundungus tries to run, you will stop him. If he removes anything else from the house, trap him in the attic and inform one of those in the family only of his incarceration. I want nothing else to leave the house, unless one of the family removes it; and Kreacher?" Regulus added. Kreacher gave him an adoring look once more. "Family is I ..." He hesitated and gave a short glance to the side, "my brother, and our godsons." His eyes flicked up as well. "Nymphadora and her mother as well. None other." He seemed only mildly reluctant to number Sirius among them. "You will speak to no family other than us unless you are in this house. You will obey orders from the family, and orders from me above all else. If someone is rude, bring it to me. Thank you. Please be elsewhere to keep a watch on the items." Regulus looked around himself and grimaced. "And clean this place up. You can do better than this; you're not that old."

Kreacher beamed at Regulus and bowed until his nose touched the floor. "Thank you, Master Regulus. Kreacher will move at once. What of the things the ..." He paused, and spoke hesitantly, "guests ... moved from the house?"

Regulus blinked, and then shrugged. "If it's enchanted, put them all in a spare room. Anything inert ... clean it and its place and return them. Let me know where it all is when I have a spare moment, or tell one of the family. Sort everything you clean into that, too. Now I've got business. Scram."

Kreacher popped away with an ecstatic expression, and Regulus shrugged awkwardly before turning back to the room. Most of the Order was looking at him suspiciously, but Dumbledore seemed to follow what was happening, and he smiled and merely watched, as Regulus stalked to the pantry and flung the door open. Inside was a

dismal cloud of disgusting green smoke, and Regulus quickly banished it.

“Mundungus Fletcher?” He asked pleasantly. Dung stood awkwardly in a pile of cloth, and nodded slowly. Regulus smiled; Harry could feel the underlying threat, but apparently Mundungus hadn’t been listening. “The meeting’s ready to start. Come out here, will you?”

Awkwardly Mundungus did so, and once he was level with the near wall, Regulus struck and rammed him into the wall, hefting him up by the throat until his toes barely touched, and they were nearly eye-to-eye. Mundungus’ eyes bulged, and the Order shouted their dismay. Geoffrey, having tailed Regulus slightly, placed himself between the Order and Regulus and merely watched.

“I want to know what you did with a large, heavy locket engraved with an ‘S’ set with green stones. I left it in this house, and I know you took it out. Where is it?” Regulus growled.

Mundungus squirmed under his grip, and finally slackened as much as he could while held up like that and wheezed, “Sold it already.”

“What do you mean you sold it?” Regulus snarled, hefting him higher. Behind him, James growled inarticulately, but after a glance at Dumbledore who remained impassive, did nothing. “You sold my fucking property, you piece of shit! I could have your life for that!”

Behind Harry, his father ground his teeth and Lily huffed. The Order stirred at Regulus’ actions, but all of them deferred to Dumbledore and did not interfere.

“Sirius never complained ...” Mundungus whined, and then choked. Apparently Regulus’ grip had tightened a moment.

“Sirius isn’t legally a Black anymore, Fletcher.” Regulus spat. “He has no say in what happens in this house, especially not while I’m here. I’m the legal heir, the one you have to worry about, and my supposed ‘death’ didn’t change it. Now, I’m here, and I want to know where is the locket?”

"I really don't keep all that much track of it; I sell loads – Ye-ouch!" Dung yelped, and then descended into swearing. Regulus had pulled out his wand, and a shiver had run down Dung's body without any voiced spell. Mundungus tried to say Regulus was asking a lot of him, and got cursed again, howling a moment in pain. The Order rumbled in distress, and finally Dung yelled, "Alright, alright, lay off, gerroff!"

"Where, Fletcher?" Regulus snarled.

"Borgin and Burkes! Sold it; got an even hundred galleons for it, said it was Slytherin's but broken. Thing doesn't open."

Regulus swore explosively and dropped Dung; Harry heard at least two people gasp at his choice of words, and behind him he felt his mother place her hand on his back. He leaned forward to keep her from covering her ears, as she seemed to want to. Regulus seemed to be working his way into a grand fit, until Geoffrey calmly interjected, "That isn't physically possible and you know because you tried."

Dead silence fell. Around him, Ginny giggled nervously, and Hermione and Ron gasped. The silence in the room seemed twice as complete once their sounds trailed off.

"Geoffrey, shut up." Regulus returned. He was remarkably bland after his earlier anger, face having moved into complete stillness.

"Ah, but you were getting riled up. And everyone knows it's bad to–"

"Geoffrey, I'm warning you."

"Sorry." He didn't look, nor sound sorry in the least. "So, before your interesting choice of exclamations that was extremely cruel to the Rottweiler in question –"

"Geoffrey! Shut it!" Regulus glared, but it held nowhere near the heat he'd directed at Mundungus before.

"Fine." Geoffrey shrugged. "You're sane now. What's the plan?"

"Geoffrey ..." The despairing tone was tinged with amusement. "Talk to Borgin. What else? Shouldn't be hard to talk him into parting with his recent acquisition."

"Will you desire any help from the Order?" Dumbledore interjected. His sudden addition made Harry twitch in surprise, and so did several others. "And an explanation would be appreciated soon. While I understand your focus on regaining this locket, no one else does."

Harry could see both the expressions Regulus and Geoffrey bore. Geoffrey looked as though Dumbledore had suggested something distasteful, and Regulus wore an expression as though there was a frog telling him how to run. From what Alan told him, Regulus treated everyone he didn't like as though they were beneath him, something his upbringing had made him very good at. Currently, he was directing it at Dumbledore, to great success.

"I think we can handle it ... Dumbledore." Regulus finally allowed. The pause seemed purposeful.

"I don't think any of your birds are up to scare tactics." Geoffrey disdainfully added. "And if they aren't up to it, they'll just ruin the whole effect. We should be back soon enough, and then you can have your explanations. In the meantime, I wouldn't want to say anything so delicate in such an insecure room anyways."

This was accompanied by a significant look at the children seated with their parents, and Molly jumped on the grounds upon which to evict them from the room. She stood imperiously, and Harry stifled a groan.

"Mr. Alfaerus is quite right, all of you do need to go to bed, or at least to leave. This is Order business, and while it seems to have spilled out around you, you should still be long gone."

In her fervour, Molly missed Geoffrey's twinge at being called 'Mr. Alfaerus' and then Regulus' mocking mimicry. Alan sighed, and, catching Regulus' eye behind her back, complained.

"Really Mrs. Weasley, we're perfectly capable of handling all this information. We're not going to be insane and try to go after the Death Eaters ourselves. You can trust us ... although," Alan looked contemplative, "your kids are Gryffindors ..."

Ron jumped to his feet and glared. "As if she'll believe you would do nothing with the information? You're probably more of a risk than the rest of us are!"

"Are you accusing me of being Dark, Ronald?" Alan growled low in his throat.

Ron flushed, but didn't deny it. Alan's eyes flashed, and he quickly and silently hexed Ron. Boils sprouted across his face, and Molly exploded in fury.

"Alan Prince, you will not hex the other children if you have any dream of remaining here! Your father is giving his all to the Order, and I will not have you causing problems in this house while we are working here! The shame on you, for fighting!" Alan and Snape both looked ready to return fire until she turned her screaming onto Ron. "And shame on you for picking a fight, I raised you better than that!"

Her tirade was cut short by Mrs. Black starting her own screaming just up the stairs, and Remus and Tonks left to silence her. With their ears still ringing, it was several moments before anyone realized that neither Geoffrey nor Regulus was in sight. Alan was standing in a more relaxed pose, looking smug, and Harry realized exactly what had transpired. Alan had taken the initiative to provoke one of Harry's friends who were not 'in the know' and it had worked beautifully, as under the chaos of Molly's yelling they had managed a perfectly clean escape. Harry didn't know what the locket meant yet, but he could tell it was important for them to go after it, and soon.

With the cacophony under control, Molly firmly ordered both boys to back off, and banished all of them from the room. She looked at Alan and seemed to quail lightly under his firmly stubborn gaze. She gathered herself and regarded Alan with frustrated ire, as Harry looked back from the doorway. Severus placed his hand on Alan's shoulder and gave him a nudge towards the door. Alan sighed.

"Dad ... it's full of Gryffindors." He whined.

Severus fought down a wry smile. "Alan, please. Geoffrey and I can brief you on what's important after. Please, just go with the others to the drawing room so Molly doesn't need to have a heart attack worrying about your 'delicate sensibilities'."

Alan snorted, but Harry saw his posture change and stiffen. For some reason, the change made Harry look at his face and the thin scar that marred his right cheek – a souvenir of his torture not a month past. Alan wasn't delicate. Harry rolled his eyes and decided to move Alan past the point of deciding, and spoke up.

"Well, I'm not fond of having your company either, Prince." Harry shot. "But if I have to put up with being in the dark, you can too. Shall we test our wits at Exploding Snap?"

Alan turned slowly to face him, walking slowly towards the door. Severus gave Harry a dark look that Harry ignored for watching Alan.

"Exploding Snap doesn't take wits, Potter, unless you are severely lacking in them. Chess is the game of wits, which I doubt you have any talent at." He drawled.

Harry shrugged negligently. "Sorry, but I didn't want to force you out of your comfort zone too quickly. Besides, what's the point of chess? So much time wasted on staring at a set of rules, I think, and you can't leave in the middle either. It cuts into my practice flying, something I think you could use help with. You've beaten me to the snitch, what, once?"

Alan curled his lip up, and mockingly bowed Harry up the stairs, taking them behind Harry as they walked silently through the entrance hall and up to the drawing room. Once there, Alan looked around slowly, clearly weighing the options for seating, and raised his eyebrows when he saw Neville had pulled out a chess-set and taken a seat over by the windows. The rest of the kids were sitting around a deck for exploding snap, and Alan carefully snubbed them to sit with Neville, who appeared thoroughly surprised to have company.

"A game, Longbottom? Or are you not up to it? Potter seems to find it too hard."

Neville paused for a long moment – too long, really, to be accidental – and then shrugged. "He has no patience. Are you going to play fair?"

Alan's mouth tugged into a smirk. "Do you expect me to cheat? Surely I can beat you without such subversive tactics."

Neville smiled in return and took his first move. Alan pulled a bag from his pocket to set his end with his own pieces, and Harry sat down with the others and returned to Exploding Snap, enjoying the game, and watching Neville and Alan engage each other completely in their own. Neville did much prefer chess, but the only person here who could beat him was Ron. Ron seemed to win no matter who played him, but Neville at least gave him a challenge that he couldn't just wipe the floor with. Harry wondered if Alan would be able to beat Ron, and got caught with his hand blowing. He returned his attention, and then paused with everyone else when Neville spoke up.

"Your rook was one space to the left last turn, Alan. Return it."

"I haven't moved it, Longbottom."

"No, you didn't. You bumped it over with your queen when you corrected her spacing. You've got your pieces used to cheating like that. Get it back where it was."

A small argument had broken out on the board as well, between their pieces, but Alan frowned. Finally he sighed. "Move back, then. Good eye, Longbottom."

"Thank you." Neville smiled, and turned back to studying the board. "And keep your Bishop still, too. He's trying to 'adjust' your knight. Rook to C8."

A commotion returned downstairs an hour later, but none of them moved even as Alan's eyes darted to the door and tightened. None of them had gotten tired waiting, and all of them were on tenterhooks, anticipating the return of the two guests. Ron finally spoke up.

"What was the big deal about the locket anyways?" Ron demanded.

Alan paused in his game, watching his bishop take Neville's last rook, and then looked boredly over at Ron.

"Why do you care? It doesn't relate to you."

Ron bristled, and Harry sighed. Alan was baiting him again. Albeit, even Harry could admit Ron was an easy target.

"It's Order business!" Ron snarled. "My family is part of the Order."

"You, however, are not." Alan stated. His tone spoke of grim finality.

"But you do know what it is?" Hermione asked.

Alan looked back over and fixed his black eyes on her before sighing. "Of course I do. Regulus is my godfather." He finished in an appallingly pompous tone; Harry had to place his two cents.

"He's still little brother to my godfather."

Harry could immediately see that Alan had to destroy his desire to laugh completely to give such a bland stare in return. Harry was suffering similar difficulty. His statement had been absolutely, unforgivably ridiculous. Neville was enjoying the freedom of smacking his forehead with his palm, as Ron gave Alan a superior look and Hermione looked frustrated.

Fred and George, however, found this a wonderful opening.

"One pompous pureblood versus –"

"The mighty Marauders –"

"Is nothing to brag about, kid."

"He'll lose." George finished and shrugged; grinning insanely as he laid down his hand. "I win, too."

Harry frowned at him, and gathered the cards to deal again. Alan returned to his chess game, which was in its last stages, but still quite fierce. Alan and Neville were evenly matched. His attention didn't remain long, however, as someone knocked on the door and opened it, stepping in with a faint smile. Alan shot out of his seat, and walked swiftly around the others to throw himself into a hug with Regulus. Regulus sighed.

"Alan, really," He protested. "Your clothes are going to be filthy now."

Alan didn't let go but quirked his head slightly. "What did you do?"

"I got the locket back, what do you think?"

Alan stepped back and frowned. "But you're in a good mood. How the Hell are you in a good mood?"

Regulus shrugged. "He's not dead."

Alan frowned a moment, tilted his head aside and then nodded slightly. "Fair?"

Regulus sighed. "Borgin was a strong contemporary of my mother's, Alan."

Alan straightened, mouthed a wide 'Oh' and then smiled and hugged him again. Regulus sighed.

"Alan, do you know how hard it is to get blood out of clothes?" He ignored the startled exclamations from the rest of the room rather masterfully.

"That's what Kreacher is for. Is he going to clean himself up, or remain a filthy ragamuffin?"

"He should be clean by now." Regulus offered. "Kreacher!"

Harry twitched backwards as Kreacher popped in, and then gaped slightly at the drastic change. Kreacher's loincloth was now a snowy white towel wrapped like a toga, and his ear hair was soft and downy. His skin even looked a shade lighter, and he looked odd against the filthy room. "Yes, Master?" Kreacher beamed. Regulus smiled warmly.

"Very well done, Kreacher, you look much better. Have you been cleaning?"

Kreacher nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, Master Regulus! Both yours and Master Sirius' rooms have been reorganized and dusted nicely, even Master Sirius' filthy muggle posters." Kreacher's mouth twisted a moment in distaste before looking adoringly at Regulus again. Harry touched Hermione's shoulder a moment and she sighed.

Regulus winced. "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred, I'd forgotten that filthy room. Kreacher, please redo my room. Neutral colours, completely. I suppose you can leave the crest, just ... neutral. And get rid of my newspaper clippings. I don't want to see them."

"Of course Master Regulus, Kreacher will get that done right away."

Kreacher popped back out, and Geoffrey stalked in, his face tight and lips curled into a scowl. His mouth only twitched minutely when he saw Alan hugging Regulus.

"Alan, blood does not like coming out of clothes, you know."

"Don't care." Alan determined almost childishly. "I'm just happy you're both back."

Geoffrey rolled his eyes, and sighed. "Yes, well, now all three of us need to clean up. Skedaddle, both of you. Kreacher will have hopefully taken care of a bathroom by now." Geoffrey finished wistfully. "Because I desperately want to shower and change my clothes. That man's filthy shop seems to be stuck to me, and if I come home bloody Ginger will eat my balls."

"What did you do to him?" Alan asked eagerly. Geoffrey finally smiled honestly.

"Persuasion, Alan. Nothing more."

Alan pouted, but didn't press as the Marauders filed in. Harry shot to his feet and smiled brightly, hopefully to hide his sardonic tendency at the moment.

"Dad! What do we get to hear this time around?" He asked. It sounded odd in his artificially happy tone, but James shook his head in understanding as he answered.

"A fair bit. All of you, the locket was something very important to Voldemort and we intend to destroy it as soon as we can figure out how. Which will probably be a challenge and a half." Harry rolled his eyes, and James continued. "It has also been explained for Regulus' decision to no longer be a Death Eater, and I and the rest of the Marauders have chosen to accept it." His eyes flicked to Regulus and he added, "Grudgingly."

"Something tells me Sirius still won't like him anyways." Harry scoffed quietly. James pretended not to hear, and Sirius and Regulus rolled their eyes.

"I expect all of you to accept that decision, but," His eyes flicked to Regulus once more, "I'd still prefer you to be cautious."

"Gee, thanks." Regulus drawled. Alan and Geoffrey sniggered quietly. James ignored them, and then Neville piped up.

"Who all's staying where? Are they going back to Snape's place, or sleeping here?"

Regulus frowned. "How many people are already sleeping here?"

"Oftentimes, all us kids. Our parents aren't comfortable with leaving us in the manors without an adult or two, and since this place is under fidelius it's safer than the manors anyways."

Regulus muttered something unpleasant under his breath, “Who’s sleeping where?”

Harry heaved a put-upon sigh, and started counting on his fingers, “Hermione and Ginny are sleeping together on the first floor; Me, Ron and Neville are sleeping on the second; Arthur and Molly are in the male suite; Melanie, Nanna, and Catrin –Vance-,” Harry clarified at Alan’s look, “are in Mrs. Black’s room; Fred, George, and Connor are on the third floor … that’s everyone.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, “Kreacher!” The house elf appeared immediately and bowed. “You’re working on my room still?”

“Kreacher is almost done Master’s room, what does Master need?”

“I need two, possibly three beds in there. It’s going to be crowded. Nice beds; I’ll be sharing with my godson and his uncle.”

“Kreacher cannot get three beds in, Master.”

“Fine. Set up a good spot on the floor, and make it comfortable. I don’t think Geoffrey will accept a spot elsewhere, the overbearing runt.”

“Yes Master, right away Master.” Kreacher popped away, and Regulus sighed.

“Leaves so damn fast. Whatever.” He sighed, and then pushed Alan off. “We need to shower. Hop to it. I’ll shower after you. Probably the highest floor is clean.”

Alan stuck his tongue out and left, and Harry sighed. James stepped in once more.

“You all need to be in bed. It’s nearly past midnight, and I expect you awake in the morning even if there is no more need for cleaning. Move along.”

The game disbanded to a chorus of moans. Harry paused as he passed his father and godfather, and Sirius' mouth twitched towards a frown as he suspected what Harry would ask.

"We don't know what they got up to at Borgin and Burke's and we can't send anyone to check. They got the locket back, though, and what they explained ... the locket is more important than some Dark artefact dealer. We just have to close our eyes today."

Harry nodded, feeling none of the distaste his father and godfather clearly felt and moved along to his room that he shared with Neville and Ron. He could see Regulus and Geoffrey's thoughts on taking it out on Borgin; he was an unimportant figure who wouldn't be missed and who wouldn't dare talk. It made perfect sense to him what they did. But to a Gryffindor, it never would.

The thought didn't scare him as much as it would have even a year ago.

A/N: Meh. Here's the chapter. Enjoy? Hope you liked who it was. The 'how' will be explained. Really, it only needed one tiny change ... But that will show up later. Kindly read and review? I feel neglected sniffle

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-seven

Harry bolted upright as a scream ripped through the door. He wasn't up long when Neville thrashed beside him and pulled himself up, half-formed words spluttering as he tried to react. Harry didn't wait, and grabbed his glasses, moving quickly out the door without asking, his wand in hand. Above and below, he could hear others stirring, but the screams were drifting down from above ... fairly far above.

"What's happening, Harry?" Hermione gasped from beside him.

Harry shook his head, and turned to run up the stairs. He reached the top landing with the twins, and found them in the doorway to Regulus' room. Geoffrey was struggling with Regulus, and on the other bed was Alan, curled up and screaming hoarsely. Harry didn't think before pushing past the twins and moving to Alan's bedside, pausing. He doubted grabbing him would go well, so he hesitantly put his palm on Alan's forehead and shouted,

"Wake up!"

Alan jerked backwards and shut his mouth, staring up at him with panicked, wide eyes that quickly registered that it was Harry standing over him, that he was inside, and that Regulus was shouting hoarsely on the bed where Geoffrey was struggling to get him awoken. Geoffrey had glanced over only a moment when Harry had yelled at Alan, and Harry could see a growing bruise on his cheek. Arthur came into the room, and moved towards Regulus' bed but Geoffrey growled,

"Stay back; anyone else will set him fucking off. Regulus' a little more unstable than Alan. Alan, get over here."

Harry backed off and Alan scrambled out of bed to move beside Geoffrey and hover, not touching Regulus at all. Geoffrey was mostly just batting him away when he flailed, never grabbing him. Harry heard him curse, and then Kreacher popped into the room and wailed.

"Master Regulus!"

Geoffrey swore, and Regulus gasped, stiffened, and then went silent, staring blankly at the ceiling before he carefully ran his hand over his face. Geoffrey hovered uncertainly, and then sighed. Regulus spoke, rasping over his abused throat.

"I told you to use silencing charms, Geoffrey. Everyone get out." He growled.

Harry left hesitantly, watching carefully before he slipped out the door last. Alan quietly whispered, "Thanks," as he left. Harry barely heard him, but he nodded and went back downstairs with the others. A check of time proved it to be around four in the morning, and Harry yawned before he rejoined Neville and Ron in their room. Ron was silent until they were laid out.

"Harry ... why'd you go in?"

"He was scared." Harry spoke quietly, thinking of how to explain. "Scared doesn't suit him. We're not just supposed to step in for only the people we like, Ron. You remember what Dumbledore said at the end of last year. He went through Hell. You wanna leave him to memories like that?"

"I suppose." Ron muttered. "What about his godfather, Sirius' brother? What was with him?"

"I don't know." Harry answered honestly. "It seemed like it was almost worse than what Alan was thinking, though. And he's probably been that way for a while; Geoffrey seemed pretty sure of what he couldn't do, at least."

"Kreacher managed to wake him." Neville added. "Something about Kreacher woke him up, calmed him down."

"It was weird." Harry allowed, and then yawned. "I want to sleep again. Goodnight."

The other two echoed him, and settled into their beds. Harry wondered what might be wrong with Regulus before he gave it up

until he could ask Alan, and slipped back into his own -pleasant-dreams.

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Breakfast the next morning was missing Regulus and Alan; Geoffrey came down late in the meal to sit tiredly at the now far cleaner table and rub his forehead until he asked Molly for a drink and a painkiller. Molly bustled to get him both, and insistently placed a plate of toast before him, pointing out the jam, honey, and other such. Geoffrey growled something incoherent, and ignored it in favour of the tea she gave him. After a few sips he also asked for coffee, which Molly sighed and set up as well. The children at the table didn't remain silent much longer after that.

"What happened?" Ron demanded.

Geoffrey grunted, and put down his cup firmly. "Nightmares. I'm sure you all know why Alan might be having them, and Regulus' are his business. Don't press, unless you don't mind being hexed. He'll have every right to do so."

"Yeah, and don't think I won't." Regulus huffed and walked in quietly, collapsing into the seat next to Geoffrey. He put his head on his arms as he lay against the table and looked up at Geoffrey with one eye. "I smelled coffee."

"Molly's making some. You can have your cup. How's Alan?"

"Fine. Just eating upstairs. Sirius?" Regulus lifted his head and eyed his brother a moment. Sirius, who had arrived that morning for the peace of mind of him and his friends, checking on the kids on his day off, looked back at Regulus with distaste. Regulus ignored it, if he was even awake enough to decipher it. "Is that mum's portrait behind the curtains?"

"Why should you care? It's not like you'll want to take it down, and you're certainly not leaving it open to yell at all of us. I won't subject the kids to it." Sirius stated flatly. Regulus' face darkened.

“I wouldn’t leave it open to yell at the children, and you know it.”

“Oh, you’d just let it yell at me and the rest of the adults, is that it?”

“Sirius, you’re being an ass –“

“And you’re the same soft moron you always were, Reggie!” Sirius yelled.

Regulus forced his chair back as he jerked to his feet, glaring daggers at his brother. “What do you know, Sirius? You haven’t seen me in years, ever since you ran away from everything!”

“You certainly didn’t care then!” Sirius yelled back. “You already had those articles at the head of your bed, following the Death Eaters like a good little puppy!”

“Oh, and now you bring the past into it, do you? Should I bring up the past that you never noticed Pettigrew was a Death Eater, higher ranking than your own fucking brother, and still one of your little friends?” Sirius blanched. “Three years! Three fucking years, Sirius! I was there when he started, and he did better than I did, although chances are the only important thing about him were his friends! Namely you, Remus and James, the fools you were.”

“Don’t you dare call me a fool.” Sirius growled. From his position across the table, Harry felt a shiver crawl up his spine. This was not going to be pretty ...

“Why? It takes one to know one. At least I’ve admitted to being a fool, Sirius, and I’ve corrected it. You’re still trying to deny everything.” Regulus forced himself to sound determinedly casual again, but he was taunting Sirius, and both of them were just waiting for an excuse to up the ante and break into a firefight. Geoffrey had dropped his head onto his arms, exasperated, and most of the kids were keeping to one side of the table and watching the dangerous banter closely.

“You’re weak, Regulus. You took to anything anyone told you.”

Regulus flinched; he'd hit a nerve. "I never did everything they told me to, otherwise I'd be in deeper shit than I now am. I know I made a mistake, Sirius, but was there really much choice? I was who I was told to be. I never had your courage, Sirius; so don't blame me for bending to mother's will. You certainly never gave me a chance to do otherwise. But I'm a little more grown up now, and I escaped her tyranny, even if it took me a few more years. Of course, you had somewhere to go, didn't you?" Regulus growled. His voice was bitter. "James Potter, your lovely Gryffindor friend. You could run to him, and uncle Alphard was willing to give you a way to keep yourself afloat. What did I have?" Regulus laughed bitterly. "A bunch of Slytherins who only liked me for my name, and half of them were deep into the Death Eater ideals – the other half were already marked. What did I have to make me think otherwise? I heard nothing but the good, and what bad I heard came from you, the little traitor." Regulus growled, finally, staring at Sirius' pale face. "I was never brave, and not particularly smart at the time. It didn't take more than a year for the gilt to wear off, Sirius, and then I was in too deep for it to really matter. Then the Dark Lord made a mistake, and I found out his stupid plan and his deceit. I have my own standards, Sirius, and once the Dark Lord lost those, it was downhill from there. I expected to die leaving his service. It was unexpected that I lived. And now, it's mother's stupid ideals that nearly killed me. What do you think I want to say to her portrait? Thanks for getting me killed; thanks for traumatizing me, and ruining my life? Thanks for bringing down the house of your fathers and maybe you shouldn't have married your second cousin so I could have a bit more sense without gaining it the hard way?"

Sirius was pale and silent as Regulus wound down; the children were all just as quiet, watching with wide eyes and slightly open mouths. Regulus sat back down and accepted the coffee Molly had mechanically finished as she listened and placed in front of him. Regulus gently sipped it down, and breathed before Sirius flopped into his seat. Regulus flicked a look his way, and Sirius finally spoke up once more.

"I'm sorry." He whispered.

"For what?"

Sirius was silent, looking around the room before sighing. "Abandoning you to ... mother's tyranny, alone."

Regulus shrugged. "I never listened to you anyways. I never would've. I didn't respect you then. I was mildly in awe of you for being willing to take a chance in being other than what was expected of you, but never wanted such rebellion myself. Everything I seemed to be at that time I was, because I didn't have the first iota of sense in my Black little head. I didn't start thinking until after I killed someone who had status amongst all the dogma that had been stuffed between my ears. Once I realized that the little racial cleansing I'd so been looking forward to would be killing more than just the lower unimportant echelons called muggles and mudbloods, I got a bit of a clue and woke up to begin thinking a little outside my lovely ... what did Velorian call it?"

"'Centuries old box', I believe." Geoffrey added, sitting up and sipping his own drink once more.

"Yeah, that. I only got a clue after I, well," He smiled bitterly, "got it beat into me by the Alfaerus, Sirius. Don't feel quite so bad. Now," Regulus tipped back the last of his coffee and stood, "I'm going to go have a little discussion with the originator of my little 'box'. And inform her I intend to marry an American, preferably a muggleborn so that her little experiment with inbreeding doesn't do any harm to my children."

Sirius snorted into his own teacup and then looked up at Regulus. "What, you're not going to marry a muggle for it?"

Regulus looked down at him and sighed. "I've gotten a little better on my horizons of what's acceptable and what isn't, Sirius, but I will never ever like muggles and I certainly don't want to live with one. Other people, fine. Me, no. Be grateful I got off my high horse enough to remember that muggleborns are magical too, and will do wonders for that inbreeding problem. I don't know about you, but I've grown to be a little disturbed that our lovely mother was as Black as our father."

Sirius' mouth twitched, and he stood and followed Regulus from the room when he went upstairs. Harry didn't pause before following, Neville, Ron and Hermione tailing him with Geoffrey picking up the rear, his coffee cup cradled in hand and a wry smile on his face. They stopped before the curtain where Mrs. Black rested, and Regulus shooed the rest out of sight before he opened her curtains with a curt spell and smiled indulgently as she woke.

"What filth disturbs me now, mudbloods and blood traitors all –I can't believe it." She stopped yelling, and toned her voice down to a gravel-like announcement, as though she must be heard by everyone at all times – and everyone would obey. Harry began to respect Regulus' pronouncement that his mother was tyrannical. Alan came down the stairs and Regulus smiled at him before turning back to address his mother.

"Yes mother, it's me. Regulus Black, whom you thought dead."

"Regulus, it's so good to see you! And I see none of those blood traitors and filth. Have you returned to reclaim everything? What happened that you disappeared? Why would you leave me?" Her tone was pleased, but became firm. Harry stifled the desire to snort and sighed. What a welcoming person.

"I suppose you could say so." Regulus allowed. He waved Alan over to his side. "Mother, this is my godson, Alan Prince. You remember that line, I'm sure." His tone was dry; apparently Mrs. Black didn't catch it. Alan maintained a stoic expression as he stood next to Regulus, and then bowed with the first stirrings of a smirk.

"A godson? Regulus, how wonderful. And the Prince line; I thought the last of theirs married a filthy muggle. Don't tell me this boy hails to that line. He looks so respectable." Mrs. Black sounded disappointed now, with enough vitriol within to make it clear that her disappointment was not to be trifled with.

Regulus sighed; Harry was pretty sure it was fake. "Yes, mother, she did. However, Alan's mother was a Callough, and she asked me to be his godfather to clear up both remaining lines. I don't think you're familiar with that line, but it hails directly from Slytherin. Alan is most

suited to returning the families to glory, and he's pleased with that, isn't he?" Regulus gently ruffled Alan's hair; Alan frowned at him and ran his fingers through it to order it back. He then turned and smiled blandly at Mrs. Black.

"It's a pleasure to meet you ma'am."

"It's my pleasure to see such a lovely young man myself." Mrs. Black returned. Her voice practically oozed selfish pride. Must have been the mention of Slytherin. "However, I do hope you have plans for your own children, Regulus." The tone was warning.

"Of course, mother, as soon as I find a fit woman of proper background." Regulus allowed. "There just aren't that many in the area, so it's difficult and since I still fear for my life ..."

"I can't believe that the Ministry and Dumbledore's meddling are still in effect, Regulus." Mrs. Black scoffed. Regulus smiled thinly, and shook his head.

"Of course not, mother. They're not who I fear killing me, though." Mrs. Black made an inquiring noise, and Regulus continued. "I'm more scared of the returned Death Eaters and their foolish notions. After all, Voldemort," He spoke the name with obvious relish and only a faint tremor in his hands, "is a conniving bastard who is ruining more of our lines than any supposed mudbloods and muggles ever could. We're breeding magic out of ourselves through overexertion and stupidity, like marrying your second cousin," Regulus spat. "I fear the Death Eaters, for they were what nearly killed me, them and their stupid dogma, but I never would have been involved in any of it if it weren't for you."

"You blame me for your wavering faith?" Mrs. Black growled dangerously. "I didn't raise you to be scared or stupid, Regulus. Are you to be just like your filthy blood traitor of a brother, that shame of my flesh?"

"I wish I could be!" Regulus let go of Alan and shouted. "I wish I was willing to tell you that you were wrong when you were alive, tell you what lies the Dark Lord spoke, the lie of our superiority when he killed

our brothers and sisters, purebloods and powerful half-bloods, those with the strength of will and character to energize the lines that were dying out of their stupidity. His lies when he himself had a muggle for a father, when he was an abomination who broke his soul to gain his supposed immortality, destroying himself and destroying his own world! Maybe if I'd spoken up before I wouldn't have had to die in order to live! Maybe I wouldn't have had to risk everything for a chance at feeling better about our world! It's your fault I'm scarred and broken, your fault I nearly died, your fault I was stupid enough to believe those lies!" Regulus paused, and Harry could only imagine Mrs. Black's face as her son regained his composure. "But I'm older now, and I can think for myself and I think that you were a selfish bitch who was willing to give too much away in order to lie to yourself that you were pure and clean and powerful." Regulus paused, and then lifted his head carefully, his composure regained startlingly quickly. "I just wanted to tell you that, and to tell you that I have every intention of keeping our line, and keeping it pure. I will never marry a muggle, I can promise you that."

Mrs. Black was heaving in deep breaths, and gasping for several minutes before she shakily growled, "At least I can rest with that reassurance that while you're throwing everything away at least you can retain your pride as a pureblood."

Regulus' mouth twitched, and he glanced over at Sirius who walked over and looked at Regulus curiously. "Are you going to inform her of your plans to find an American muggleborn, or no?"

Harry stepped over in time to see Mrs. Black's eyes bulge and her begin to scream inarticulately. Regulus laughed, clapped Sirius on the shoulder and then spelled the curtains shut once more. Sirius joined him in laughing, and when Regulus finally breathed again, he sighed and then looked between Sirius and his hand and made a show of wiping it off on his robes with a faked pinched expression. Sirius chortled and smiled honestly.

"Thank you, for that. It was nice to hear you play her like that."

Regulus smiled wanly. "It was nice to tell her what I thought. I'll have Kreacher work on getting her portrait down in one way or another. If

nothing else, I could probably have Green or Amaranth come over and play with it.”

Sirius looked at him curiously. “Those were the Quintelyuv brothers from the World Cup, weren’t they?”

Regulus nodded. “Yeah, them. They have another brother, but he’s no spell smith or Potions expert and he’s usually busy.” Sirius gave a curious expression, and Regulus snorted. “He’s a necromancer. Usually spends his time running to trials and exorcising ghosts.”

Sirius’ face twitched and Harry felt a little off himself, but he finally sighed and shrugged. Necromancers were creepy, and considered dark, but after dealing with vampires among the Americans, Harry felt that maybe the British were off about the necromancers too. After all, Green was weird as Hell. His brother couldn’t be all that different.

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When the rest of the Marauders were able to return to Grimmauld for supper, Sirius easily told them that he trusted his brother completely now and Harry watched them grudgingly accept Sirius’ judgement. There were also pleased sounds at the far cleaner house, and Kreacher’s silence upon entering the rooms where the Order prowled. He was disinclined to listen to any of them other than Alan or Regulus, but it was a marked improvement from his sullen mutterings of before. As expected, the children were exiled from the kitchen. Alan disappeared into Regulus’ room, which bothered none of them, and they settled into Exploding Snap after attempts to sneak an extendable ear into the room failed once more. Rolling up the fleshy string, Harry relaxed and settled to watch Ron deal. Finally, he glanced at the twins.

“You plan on talking to Prince about him giving you his winnings?” Harry asked idly.

Fred and George sighed. “Not really, no. It was an unexpected windfall, and it’s really gotten us on our feet with our joke shop. He handed it over; we’re not about to give it back and since he didn’t say a word ...”

Neville snorted. "You're just going to give him partial ownership, aren't'cha?"

Fred and George snorted, and Neville rolled his eyes before turning back to the chess game he was playing against Connor. Connor wasn't the greatest chess player, but Neville was patient in teaching him some of the tricks, explaining whenever his brother made a move that was distinctly foolish, or left his king too open. Harry had sometimes taken to watching so then he would be able to do a bit better, but he could either never remember the pointers, or Neville or Ron purposefully goaded him into making the mistakes and only reminded him afterwards ...

III

The excitement that was the arrival of the American guests died down rather quickly. Regulus and Alan seemed to have silencing charms as they came down tired but no one heard any more screams. It was little more than a week before Geoffrey left to tie up a few problems that had cropped up back home, leaving one less person sleeping over at a time. It also meant that most of the time, it was all of the younger kids and Regulus stuck in the house constantly, without even cleaning left to do. Harry knew that Regulus was coaching Alan on a few spells they didn't teach in school, and on the working of his new gun, a Para-Ordnance LDA, something that went completely over Harry's head. However, the spells were what were interesting, and Harry could get absolutely no time alone to try and work them over with Alan and Regulus without drawing attention to how close they really were.

The twins saved him the trouble, with their extendable ears. One week after Regulus had arrived and the day after Geoffrey had left, Fred paused in his breakfast and pointed his fork at Regulus.

"You're teaching Prince spells. He's not practicing them much, but you're still showing him and talking him through theory. Can't you take it to the drawing room so we can all practice?"

Regulus shrugged and finished his drink before answering. “Some of the spells and concepts aren’t legal British concepts and I don’t want to have to tone it down for the rest of you.”

George scoffed. “Prince is currently living in Britain. He shouldn’t know those either. We’re into a war; legality in what we use to keep ourselves alive shouldn’t be all-important. Just let us know what is illegal, and we can decided whether to learn it or not.”

“I thought you were against ‘dark magic’.” Regulus drawled.

Fred stuck out his tongue as George rolled his eyes. “We want to fight. And you wouldn’t be teaching Prince anything unduly dark anyways.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t?” Regulus returned. “Alan would never tell.”

“No.” Fred laughed. “But Dumbledore’s in and out of this place, and if you were practicing stuff that would be dark enough to stand out, he’d notice so you wouldn’t dare.”

Regulus’ mouth twitched, and he sighed. “Fine. We’ll move into the drawing room but I’m not taking forever to explain everything if you don’t get it the first time.”

Nanna smiled from her seat down the table. “That’s what Hermione and Neville are for.”

Regulus looked down at her and sighed. “Most of the spells will be well beyond fourth year level; I’m not sure Melanie, Nanna, Connor and Catrin could use them.”

Harry shrugged. “Try keeping them from attending. I dare you.”

Regulus sighed, and sat back. “Probably worse then my brother, aren’t they?”

"Worse indeed." Neville added. "They learned his example long before he had a chance to conceptualize how to be the worst little monster possible so they got a head-start."

Regulus moaned. "What have you talked me into?"

"Teaching." Harry smiled.

"I'm sure it'll all be wonderful, Mr. Black." Hermione soothed.

Regulus started in his seat and nearly fell backwards. "What, where? Wait." He stopped looking frantically around the room and put his hand to his forehead. Alan laughed quietly as the others looked on in confusion.

"Sorry, godfather," Alan drawled, "but your dad is long dead even if you're back in Grimmauld, so she was referring to you."

"Insubordination." Regulus muttered. "You can always go the way of Mrs. Black, you know?"

Alan kept a straight face, "You mean permanently stuck to a wall or handed over to the tender mercies of the Quintelyuvs?"

Regulus' smile widened, and Harry snickered. Kreacher had been unable to remove Mrs. Black from the wall, despite his many efforts so finally the wall itself was removed and while Sirius, Remus and James desperately wanted to sink her to the bottom of some body of water, Regulus had given them that, or sending her to America to be experimented on to find out how the painting was enchanted, stuck to the wall in the first place, and then subjected to several methods of trying to remove her to satisfy the curiosities of a couple 'mudbloods'. The Marauders had asked for a day's recess to discuss the options, before deciding upon the Quintelyuvs and whoever else wanted to help, so long as they got full reports of what was done to her. Green had been more than happy to oblige.

"Quintelyuvs. Now, if Alan is done and I am done, then I'm going to the Drawing room and you must all come now or miss the beginning. I'm teaching Alan and you're all just tagalongs who will no longer

have to resort to petty gags to listen in. Although I suppose questions wouldn't be too much of a burden, so long as they're intelligent."

"You hear that, Harry, Ron, twins?" Neville scolded. "Only me and Hermione are allowed to open our mouths."

"Hey!" Harry objected. Neville stuck out his tongue and then dashed up the stairs to the drawing room, Harry tailing him from behind. However, Neville was a fast and avid runner, and he easily outpaced Harry. Both of them were upstairs first, and in the moments before the others arrived, Harry caught up with him and pouted, "It's no wonder you're a bloody horse."

Neville just laughed.

The rest of the kids caught up quickly, and settled into a half-circle around Regulus who eyed their attention with a moment's apprehension before he smiled warmly. "I expect no parents to hex me when they see you next, alright?" He received a chorus of nods. "Right. Alan and I have been going over a few more ... active defence spells. If you want to call it that." He licked his lips, and changed gears again. "Does everyone here know the basics for the reductor curse?" Harry and Neville smiled; anyone under fourth year shook their heads. Regulus patiently went over the basics, incantation, wand motion, and what it did before he returned to his thread. "Now most people will tell you to use the reductor curse against objects. Well, please remember what it does very well because what that curse does to solid objects can easily be turned against flesh. Now, please don't use this unless you want to severely injure someone. It will do serious damage. Like ..." Regulus paused and then conjured a small rubbery blob that looked like jello in a sack. He then turned his wand around and cast "Reducto." The blob shredded and rang like a bell, making Connor and the others jump and then flinch as brilliant red liquid spilled out, splashing and soaking into the carpet. Catrin looked teary eyed, but Melanie quickly comforted her. Regulus was unmoved. "That is similar to what that spell might do to someone. Be very cautious how it is used."

The room was very silent but for Catrin's weak sniffles. Melanie spoke to her a few more moments, and then sent her from the room. Melanie shrugged weakly, and Regulus nodded, and then smiled.

"Not everything I've been teaching Alan is spells, though." His grin was making Harry nervous. "Some things we've been working on are a few other small things that are within fifth year conjuring range. Some of the most obvious are knives." Regulus quickly conjured three small knives; small enough to hide easily inside a pocket, but with very keen edges. "Can you tell how I did that? Have you covered conjuring yet?"

There was a general motion of shaking of heads, but Hermione and Neville were eying the items carefully, as was Alan. Fred and George had simply nodding, apparently intent upon soaking up the lesson. Harry was feeling remarkably left out, and grateful for Ron's similarly confused presence beside him. Ron smiled shakily. "Glad to see I'm not the only one who doesn't read textbooks before we've even bought them." The others heard; Neville and Hermione looked a little flushed, Neville more amused than embarrassed unlike Hermione. Alan just smirked his annoying smirk; Harry still felt like hitting him every time he did that. Ron's expression was exactly the response Alan aimed for: furious. Harry elbowed Hermione with a friendly smile, and Regulus sighed.

"Alright," Regulus allowed. "We'll go into that in a moment. Other things you might conjure would be caltrops." Regulus gave another complicated wave with a focused look and a small four-pointed item fell into his hand. Harry looked at it curiously; it looked like a jack, but larger, metal, and with each arm a wicked spike, and with one pointing straight up ... Harry felt uneasy; he didn't want to know what it was for. "Anyone recognize it?" He asked mildly. The twins elbowed each other a moment; Hermione looked pale, but Neville was guardedly curious. Finally, one of the twins answered.

"They're scattered on the ground for soldiers or horses to step on. Sometimes poisoned."

Harry winced and paled, his mouth dropping open slightly. Ron swore faintly, and Neville made a surprised noise; Melanie gulped. That would go clean through someone's foot!

Regulus continued as though he didn't see the many reactions. "Conjuring them means they won't last very long, depending on one's strength. I've only ever managed about a day at best, about ten hours usually. Alan could make them last two to three days if he extended himself and was well-disciplined." Harry watched Alan blink with a blank expression; he apparently hadn't been aware of that measure of his strength. "However, they will still be functional if you can conjure them well, and serve the purpose required." Regulus grinned. "There are other fronts on which that's useful, but it should be unimportant to you.

"Lastly," Regulus handed the caltrop over to Alan and then smiled warmly again before pulling something from his pocket, "there's a small weapon that most people would label unimportant but which can be very useful to us as wizards. Slingshots." He held up the more modern slingshot, of a forked brace with elastic between for shooting the item in question. "Can anyone name what would cause the most trouble when put in here?"

Neville raised his hand slightly before speaking up, twitching a glare Harry's way at his soft snicker. "You could spread caltrops with that easily, but also if you used breakable containers you could spread potions of some kind, particularly explosive or caustic ones."

Regulus' mouth twitched. "Very observant of you. Kinda scary, really. Remind me not to get in a fight with you; you're as bad as Alan." Neville flushed a moment, and Regulus chuckled. "Anyways, you can indeed do both of those, as well as simply using hard objects which is where conjured objects definitely come in handy as the object only needs to last long enough to be shot and connect; then it's merely debris. In this instance, even the weakest of spells are effective so long as the constitution remains. So, now the question is: Do you want to learn more magical theory without really being able to practice, as your parents woulf probably frown at the subterfuge, or do you want me to show you how to aim with a slingshot and some potions which would be good for throwing at people? Show of hands

for that? Alan, you don't mind?" Regulus looked around the room and smiled. "Alright. Let's get back into the basement. It's the most contained; Kreacher can take the table elsewhere, and you all can learn how to scare some purebloods shitless."

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The next Order meeting came into the kitchen to find it half-blocked off with a magical barrier while a few people worked on potions just beyond. Just outside the barrier, Alan stretched once more and waited for his father to come through. Inside, several of the kids turned and waved warmly, much to James and Lily's surprise. James was silent for a long moment before Remus rolled his eyes and walked over to Alan to politely ask what was going on. Alan answered shortly,

"Your kids all got bored, so Regulus is showing them a few ways to defend themselves that don't involve magic."

James gaped for a moment longer before asking, "But why potions?"

Alan shrugged, hiding his grin behind his stoic mask. "They're undetectable by the ministry as magical experimentation and tend to be very annoying if shot in a fragile glass ball from a slingshot? They're working on Mimi's Instant Fever Dream at the moment, something even Connor can manage."

James blinked, and then did a double-take. "I've never heard of that potion."

Remus and Frank shrugged as well, and Lily rolled her eyes. "James, it's an American brew. Extremely straightforward although requiring a few rare ingredients, preparation is very easy. It's generally non-lethal, but skin contact produces instant absorption and incapacitating delirium for a period of time depending on the amount used and the potency of the particular brew. You also go into a mild-to-severe fever, which can leave someone weak even after the brew fades, as the fever doesn't go down easily without an antidote, although it will not worsen either."

Someone coughed lightly behind her, and the Marauders turned to find themselves facing Severus. He sent a smile Alan's way, who smiled easily back, staying against the wall to anchor the barrier. Regulus had wanted as strong a barrier as possible, so Alan was the one casting while he coached inside. Severus turned a faint smile back to Lily. "You seem to have completely absorbed the journal you insisted on borrowing from me, Lily. I could swear that was a direct quote." He ignored James' hostile look in his addressing Lily. Alan watched with interest.

"The potions I'd never encountered that were in there were fascinating." Lily allowed. "And Mimi's does make perfect sense. I hope they're only making them mild, though."

"They are, ma'am." Alan spoke up. "Regulus didn't have enough jabberwocky venom to make them any stronger, didn't want to waste it even if he did, and would you trust four Weasleys and the children of the Marauders with a potion that could cause havoc like that?"

Lily's mouth quirked. "No, I don't think so. However, we do need to have our meeting soon ... and what happened to the kitchen table? And Alan ..." She stared shortly, looking confused.

Alan regarded the space in the room a moment to hide his grin, and then shrugged. "Kreacher moved it out while we were working. He can have it back as soon as they're done, which ..." Alan looked over at the glimmering wall and traced a small rune on the edge before a gentle hum built up and then went back down. Regulus, behind the barrier, turned and waved before he turned back to the children. Alan smiled. "About five minutes and it'll all be wrapped up."

"Alan, why are you maintaining the barrier?" Lily asked. James looked confused, and then torn between wry amusement and irritation. "You're underage."

Alan smiled sweetly at her. "I'm not British, though, and I've got my guardian's permission." His smile turned wry. "Neither does Severus mind. I'm not doing anything evil with it, and I'm in a house full of adults. You going to turn me in?"

James looked tempted, but as Lily wryly shook her head, Alan nodded shortly, and gave her another sweet look. Lily's attention had returned to the potions, while Severus purposefully moved closer to Alan, apparently attempting to keep the rest of the room from wondering the same thing as Lily.

"Could I have a sample kept of one of those if it's complete?" Lily asked. "I'd like to check it out for myself."

Alan shrugged again. "No problem, I'm sure." He was cut off from speaking more as a boom echoed behind him and the barrier rippled again. He slammed his eyes shut, and Severus immediately touched his shoulder, only to be gently held off. However he didn't let go, staying in contact, even while Alan turned a glare upon the room beyond where two redheads were being chewed out by Regulus, two who could only be the twins. Severus sighed, and released Alan's shoulder to step forward and trace a rune on the barrier before walking through. Alan straightened carefully and leaned against the wall, aiming a dark look through to the people beyond. The room he was currently in was dead silent, save for the floo flaring and faint sounds of the door above being opened and shut. Lily, fortunately, stepped over as well, again giving doubt upon the origin of the barrier. A small group came down the stairs, and Alan suppressed a sneer with difficulty upon seeing the Weasleys. They just had to show up after their twins were brats, didn't they? The two parents eyed the barrier with concern as they approached.

"What's happening here?"

Lily sighed. "Our children were bored, so Regulus agreed to teach them how to make a few potions that they could use to defend themselves with. Currently your twins just made a bit of a mess."

Molly looked over with concern and approached the barrier. Alan sighed and spoke up, "Mrs. Weasley, you can't pass the barrier. I don't know exactly what sort of mess they made beyond, so you're just going to have to wait out here."

Molly blinked at Alan for several moments, before straightening, though she was still shorter than Alan himself. "Excuse me, Prince, but I believe I have every right to go to my children as I am needed."

"That's lovely, Mrs. Weasley," Alan allowed with a false grin, "but as I'm anchoring the barrier for Regulus and it's completely solid I don't think you're going to get much of anywhere and I would thank you profusely to not mess with it while I holding it, alright? The backlash of breaking it wouldn't leave any of my guardians kindly disposed towards you."

James snorted. "Snape walked through just fine."

Alan didn't even have a chance to answer before Lily turned and planted her finger on James' sternum. "Severus used a compatible equation to open the barrier first which was probably aided by him being Alan's blood relative. He could walk through just fine due to that, so please don't be poking at magical phenomenon you don't even recognize, James."

James growled. "How does a kid just going into fifth year know magic I don't anyways?"

Alan repressed several possible responses that would not have left his friends happy with him. He was quite certain both Harry and Neville knew some magic their parents were clueless about, such as Neville's very impressive Favreau's Mantle. Auror level did not mean it was required knowledge. Instead, he calmly answered, "Practice. And Geoffrey. Besides," Alan lied through his teeth with a grin, "I'm just holding the barrier for Regulus. He coached me to put it up."

The sweet tone didn't fool James at all, but the addition of the American auror's name cleared his face, and he nodded wryly, still looking a bit out-of-sorts. Geoffrey and James, of all things, managed to get along fairly well and James respected his arcane knowledge. Amusingly enough, James, the Marauder, was the more stable Auror of the two. However, Alan was shortly called back to his barrier when he felt someone touch it from inside. Alan quickly looked over to see Regulus, and dropped it. The shimmering barrier disappeared and Regulus turned back to the other children.

“Fred, George, get yourselves cleaned up and then come back down.” He growled. “And remember that you’re not getting to participate again until you show some maturity. I will not have more tomfoolery just because you want to be complete jerks. Scram.” The twins left, and Harry coughed a moment before smiling up at his parents and stepping forward after seeing that Regulus and Severus had fallen into their own discussion. Alan watched him walk over and felt a small coil of irritation at the careful set Harry had to his shoulders. He was still nervous around his father and Alan didn’t even think his parents noticed. However, Nanna did reach them first, rushing to her father’s arms.

“Dad!” She screeched. “Did you see? I did it perfectly until the twins made a mess and spoiled all the potions. Harry did a good job too; everyone but Connor had it right, and his failed because he wasn’t quite sure how to cut everything and prepare the ingredients. Reggie said he did well for someone not even in Hogwarts yet. I’m so excited.”

James laughed, and listened, and Lily pulled Harry to herself in a hug as well. Alan saw that was mostly what was happening all around the room, and felt a small pang of loneliness before he stepped from the wall to find Severus and Regulus. They were in the far corner, talking about what went wrong with the twins, but Regulus looked up and smiled as Alan walked over, waving him near. Alan went and hugged him shortly, before Regulus started the conversation again.

“What did you think of Alan’s barrier, Severus?” Alan looked up at Regulus, and then turned to watch his father. Severus was giving him a considering look.

“I recognized it by some of my articles only. I’m not sure I like it; he felt it when the twin’s made their little stunt.”

Regulus shrugged. “It is a small failing, but it was the best barrier we could put up in this instance as the room down here is the only safe place for potion-making as Kreacher hasn’t cleaned up the small labs we have upstairs. And those are also too small for all the kids anyways. We needed the barrier to come down easily, but to hold

strong while up. Alan knows Franklin's Explosion Barrier really well - Green insisted upon it - and he's the strongest wizard in the group. Alan's several times stronger than I am, as you know, and the others need the practice and don't know the spell besides." Regulus grinned wryly. "You know Alan certainly doesn't need any practice with potions, and he's got that calibre."

Severus looked down at Alan, and Alan hoped he was not blushing slightly like he felt he was. Severus' mouth twitched, and Alan felt like cursing Regulus. Severus just shook his head slowly. Alan finally spoke up.

"It doesn't actually hurt to have the barrier tried; it's simply disorienting because you're feeling something you know isn't really there. It takes a fair bit of concentration to have the spell up; that's part of why I was outside it, other than for the basic needs of maintaining it and knowing what was going on so as to bring an end once we finished and you guys came back."

Severus sighed. "Alright then. Please take care of yourself. Now, unless you want to argue Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley into allowing you to stay, please head upstairs with the others."

Alan smiled up at Severus' frozen scowl and wondered just how his father would take the news that he was friends with James' son. He probably should approach him with Harry as Lily's son first; Severus was still very respectful of Lily Evans, even with her becoming a Potter.

Severus was unmoved by Alan's personal wonderings and ushered him out before the rest. Alan just sighed and moved towards his room upstairs. He devolved into a smirkinIf he could get Harry and Neville's attention, he could try and get Neville to help him with the theory for the Auror level spells he still didn't follow. But how to get them to come without including the others ... Alan just grinned and kept going up the stairs.

A/N: Here we go. Another chapter. Thank you very much for reading, and double love to those who review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-eight

Harry groaned as he woke up, taking a minute to try and remember what had woken him and why he felt so cruddy. A glance at his clock took him a moment to register, because apparently the argument downstairs that had disturbed him wasn't over. He couldn't understand it, but he did find his glasses and read the clock: 5:30, shortly before sunrise, Aug 22nd. Harry let himself fall back into the bed and muttered several words worth getting his mouth washed out. Beside him, Neville shifted and groaned as well.

"Harry, what the Hell are you doing shifting about?"

"Argument downstairs." Harry muttered, pulled back just enough from the pillow. "And sorry. You could have shared with Ron again."

Neville yawned and shifted back into his pillow. "No. Ron twitches and sprawls. You don't. Deal with it."

"Buggery." Harry growled and shifted back down, before getting up with a muffled curse; he had to use the loo, dammit. "Be back shortly, Neville."

Neville made an inarticulate noise and pulled the blankets around himself once more. Harry just rubbed his eyes and wandered into the hallway and across, pausing when he returned. It sounded like Regulus was the one having a fit, and Harry frowned before sneaking downstairs. Whatever it was was more than any of them had heard all summer; he might as well listen in to see what was the problem. He didn't have to go far; down on the landing below, Nanna was already sitting in the doorframe listening intently. She looked up as Harry crouched beside her and shushed him with her hand, pointing further downstairs at the light spilling onto the stairs from the kitchen. Voices were down there, the voices of Dumbledore and Regulus, and possibly a few others. Harry was surprised to hear his father add to the argument, sounding surprising pleasant. What on earth ...

"-You're still denying all of it? Do you know how impossible it is to get Harry and the twins to pay attention? They are so easily distracted, it's a wonder they can play Quidditch."

"Harry's a seeker: he's supposed to be distracted by small shiny objects. Beaters get to try and knock people off their brooms. Neither spot is all that boring." Regulus retorted.

"Neville never pays attention for more than five minutes if the learning isn't moving fast enough for him." Alice added her voice. It seemed to be a really odd combination to Harry: Alice, his father, Regulus and Dumbledore.

"Neville's migrating towards Alan half the time." Regulus dryly pointed out. "The two of them seem to entertain each other with half insults, small lies, and a modicum of truth. The boy should've been anything other than a Gryffindor. He's got the drive of a Ravenclaw and the cunning of a Slytherin. I've yet to see a single Gryffindor characteristic in him."

"Regulus." Dumbledore added. "You understand all of them very well."

"Dumbledore, I've told you already, I will not teach your stupid brats. I'd terrify the little Hufflepuffs, antagonize the Gryffindors and be lynched by the Slytherins. The Ravenclaws would want to interrogate me to find out precisely why a dead man was alive, and I'll thank you if I don't want to deal with that. The children here are far different than the general populace. Stop trying to drag me into your school."

Dumbledore sighed in grand disappointment, and James growled, "Coward."

Harry wished he could see what had transpired from that. Something crashed and shattered; Alice growled some foul word that made Harry change where Neville had learned half his language, and then Dumbledore shouted, "Enough!"

There was silence for several minutes before Dumbledore finally asked, "Regulus, I'm ashamed of your reaction, and while James was out of line, you did not need to respond so. Now, it's a simple request. Will you, or will you not, teach Defence at Hogwarts for the next year? Right now, there is a threat of a ministry lackey becoming teacher,

and I do not believe she will be a very friendly woman towards your godson.”

“Dumbledore …” Regulus growled. He sighed angrily, and there was a period of quiet before he finally answered in a carefully pleasant voice. “I am not going to paint ‘Shoot me’ on my naked hide and dance on the Fountain of Magical Brethren, much less teach the goddamn brats present at your school, so back the fucking Hell off and leave me be. Go pester Geoffrey into doing something so stupid; I’m having none of it. Good day.” He finished in a snarl, and Harry and Nanna heard him begin to climb the stairs.

Nanna squeaked quietly and slipped inside her own door, and Harry stood to return to his own room before Regulus went by. He slipped inside quietly, and closed the door, waiting in the dark for Regulus to walk by. Harry nearly jumped when Neville spoke up around a yawn.

“What’s going on downstairs, then?”

Harry sighed heavily, and walked backwards, hearing Regulus step quickly by and moving back into bed, putting his glasses on the table in the aim of getting more sleep. Five was not an hour he wished to be awake for.

“Dumbledore was asking Regulus to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts because he can handle us so well. Regulus said no.”

“In that many words?”

Harry could hear the incredulous expression Neville would be wearing, with his eyebrows raised and his eyes wide. “No, he ended it by saying he wasn’t about the paint ‘shoot me’ on his naked hide and dance on the Fountain of Magical Brethren, much less teach Dumbledore’s little brats.”

Neville burst into stifled chuckles, and Ron blearily inquired as to what had them up. Both of them reassured him they’d tell him later, when it was daylight, and Ron subsided. Neville and Harry followed suit, but sleep was elusive. Neville finally asked another question.

"You were gone too long for that to be all you heard. Anything else of interest?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Your mother has a foul mouth."

Neville groaned. "What got her going this time?" Harry hesitated, and Neville clucked his tongue. "Harry ..."

"My dad called Regulus a coward and Regulus retaliated somehow. He didn't appreciate it, apparently. Dumbledore broke them up."

Neville was silent for a time, and then shrugged. "That'd do it. Anything else fun said? Before that."

Harry shifted onto his back. "Regulus said he couldn't find any Gryffindor qualities in you for some reason. All Ravenclaw and Slytherin."

Neville was silent, and then shrugged, settling without a word. Harry waited, but Neville didn't respond, and finally he grew too curious and turned to look at what he could see of him in the dark room.

"Neville?"

"The Sorting Hat wanted me in either of those, not Gryffindor. I didn't want to be sorted separate from you, and knew you wouldn't go anywhere but Gryffindor. Maybe if I'd chosen otherwise you'd finally be yourself, rather than lying to your mum and dad, alright?" Neville rolled to put his back to Harry and finished. "You're still scared of him, whether you'll admit it or not, and it's pathetic."

Harry silently absorbed what Neville had said, and then nodded curtly, swallowing hard. "Then maybe I'll just go share with Ron, if you're so disgusted." Harry angrily returned.

"You do that. Come back when you can grow up."

"I haven't heard anything of you telling your parents about that." Harry shot. He didn't want to hear this from Neville. This was his brother, and he ...

"Was my mother surprised at all when Regulus threw that at her?" He waited a moment for Harry to remain distinctly silent and finished, "I thought not. Go back to sleep, Harry."

Harry waited, and then grabbed his glasses and moved them to the other nightstand by Ron, poking the redhead quietly to try and get him half-awake again. Ron didn't move, and in a fit of pique, Harry donned his glasses, grabbed a housecoat, and moved his way into the library, finding a table and curling up in a nearby over-stuffed chair.

He couldn't help brooding on just how many times Neville had accused him of cowardice, how many times Alan had said the same. Both of them, both of the people he liked most thought he was a coward. Did they ever think? He knew it was cowardice on his part. He couldn't tell his parents; couldn't stand the thought of it. His mother would be disappointed, and James ...

He'd seen when James had heard Charlie Weasley going on about what magnificence Basilisks exemplified. James had called them despicable creatures, being favoured by Slytherin. Kingsley Shacklebolt, an auror and a passing friend had had to talk his way into James' regard, being hindered by having been a Slytherin in school. He'd used the reasoning that he'd almost made Gryffindor, but had had a little too much ambition as a kid, had wanted to be great before he'd wanted to help. It had taken James almost nine months to start acknowledging that Kingsley was talented, loyal, and wonderful, and he'd then spoken of it as what a shame him not being Gryffindor had been. Harry wondered if Neville even remembered all those arguments, all the anger Harry wanted to avoid. He'd been far too curious as a child, far too inquisitive. He'd always been where he shouldn't have, so no matter how much his mother had tried, he'd come across his father in his anger, and he'd heard him ranting many times. And to run into a boggart with those irrational fears ... with his own understanding of the school houses and his subconscious acknowledgement that he truly held such Slytherin characteristics ... Harry had merely been grateful Remus was willing to remain silent, willing to keep Harry's shameful fears to himself.

They just never seemed to understand. Harry found that he didn't really understand it himself; he knew his father wasn't really all that bad; he'd apparently accepted Regulus alright. Hell, even Sirius was being civil to his brother now, but ... Harry couldn't shake the fear. It was Regulus they were accepting, Regulus who had risked his life to leave behind his mistakes, Regulus who had thrown away his past. Essentially, Regulus had firmly abandoned whatever made him intolerable. Harry would be exposing a lie. And he knew he wasn't supposed to lie, but how do you tell such a truth? Keeping it under wraps was safest; keeping it under wraps let everyone be happy. Why were Neville and Alan so insistent that he open up about it?

"Hey, Potter."

Harry yelped and nearly rolled out of the chair. Looking up, Harry swallowed his heart out of his throat as Regulus looked down at him with a wry smile.

"Good morning. Did the argument wake you up?" Harry nodded cautiously and pulled out of the ball he'd curled into, hoping Regulus wouldn't notice how upset he'd been. Apparently his hopes were in vain, however, as Regulus gently reached over and brushed Harry's cheek, a small tear on his finger. Harry knew Regulus was aware that he and Alan were friends; Alan had long ago told him. Alan told Regulus everything, like he was a big brother or a father figure. Regulus just watched him for several minutes, before he leaned back in the wooden chair that was just adjacent to a nearby table, currently right next to Harry's overstuffed chair.

"You came down and listened to a fair bit of it, didn't you?" Harry didn't bother denying it, just shrugging. "You must have been there to hear your father insult me, then, and the fight we got into. It wasn't bad; he'll just be silver and green for a little while." Harry tried to suppress a flinch, and Regulus was silent for several minutes. Harry didn't know what he was thinking, as he wasn't looking at him, but finally Regulus placed his hand gently on Harry's shoulder before he pulled his wand and silently cast a silencing charm and privacy ward. "Harry ..." He began, and then shook his head.

"Harry, you know how much Alan tells me. And several times he's mentioned things you probably wouldn't appreciate about you. He does the same about all his friends, Andrew and Blaise and all as well, I hear everything. I know you're his best friend, on a level with Andrew, but I'm sure you know exactly what Alan thinks of your attitude towards your father. Harry ... would you tell me why you're so scared of that?"

Harry felt a growing blush of anger on his cheeks. Alan was in such deep shit for bandying that about! He knew Harry didn't want him talking about it, and he goes ahead and spills it to Regulus like it's some old news! Between him and Neville, you'd think that was all they noticed! How fucking scared he was! Well, he wasn't damn scared, he was being damn practical and at least he never spoke up with things were better left silent!

A moment later, the wind completely left his sails, and Harry curled further in on himself as self-recrimination pulled down on him. He knew better, damn it. He'd spoken up about Neville when he shouldn't have, even if it was to Alan, and Harry knew very well that Alan told Regulus everything. He'd never had a problem with it before, either. But then again ...

"Harry, do you want to know what I fear? And it's not the death of a loved one, either."

Harry looked up when Regulus offered, and found Regulus to have a flat, earnest grey gaze, with no guile and no expectations; in fact, he looked mildly preoccupied. Finally, Harry nodded softly. Regulus answered in a quiet voice, holding his gaze the entire time.

"I fear inferi, and water. I haven't been swimming in a long time. I've always disliked swimming, though. But I never feared it before. Do you want to know why I fear that?" Harry nodded slowly, never losing Regulus' gaze. He watched his expression grow wry. "Most would say I got it doing something heroic. I've never considered it such. I got it going after that locket, though. To get through, I had to take a boat across a black lake filled with inferi. They were quiescent, at first. Completely so until I drank the potion to get down to the locket so Kreacher could leave with it." Regulus closed his eyes and looked

away. "It was a hallucinogen that recreated bad memories, alongside pain. The number of people I'd killed then, as a Death Eater ... and I was so thirsty, and the only water ..." Regulus fell silent, his hands clasped together in a white knuckled grip. Harry finished what he could not say, the conclusion so obvious for someone like Voldemort.

"The water in the lake, and ... it woke the inferi. How ... how did you ..."

Regulus sighed, and after another long moment ran his fingers through his hair. "Kreacher. As they tried to drag me down, he forced them to let go, and popped me out of the room, to my room here. My mother was here, saw me come home ... I kept her silent for a few days with my weakness, until I was feeling better ... then I Obliviated her, and left. Ran into Amber, and ... well, that's how I attached to Alan."

Harry felt a little startled that Regulus had told him that, that Regulus had gone through that to put down Voldemort. Harry shook his head, and looked aside, finally speaking. "That has nothing to do with me and my fear."

"I feared my mother before I ever feared inferi, Harry." Regulus answered blandly. Harry whipped around in surprise, and Regulus gave another wry smile. "It wasn't a boggart worthy fear, and in a way, that was unfortunate. It should have been. I never went against her, and you know where that led me. I followed her every whim like a blind doll, led like a horse wearing blinders and I never took them off until they were ripped from my face, leading to me going into that lake. The change was almost unbearable. I would have died had Amber not taken me up. You're not blind, Harry, you don't even wear blinders. Your parents didn't raise you that way. You're imposing your own limits upon yourself." Harry's face grew stubborn, and Regulus smiled truly then, throwing him off. "I wonder how many students don't go where they're suited because of the expectations their parents have." He smiled when Harry leaned forward, his question in his eyes. "Hufflepuff, Harry. Had I been willing – not afraid – at eleven I would have belonged in Hufflepuff. But I was groomed to be a Slytherin." Regulus stood and walked out as he finished his statement, cancelling the spells. "Are you only ever going to be who you were

groomed to be, Harry? Are you going to let your father live that blindly?" Regulus turned back. "Maybe you should think that it's not you who must grow up, but him. But nobody's made him do that yet, you know. Nobody's made him think." Regulus turned out again and left with the last words, "He's as bad as my mother that way."

Harry waited behind in his seat in silence, thinking hard and long about Regulus last point. His father, as bad as Walburga Black? It was ludicrous, but Harry knew better than anyone that it was frighteningly accurate. He certainly wasn't as militant as her, but he was definitely intolerant of others for inane reasons. Someone's house in school? It was almost more pathetic than blood supremacy. A schoolyard grudge carried above and beyond the point of reason.

Harry curled into himself once more, and laid his head on the arm of the chair. His father was wearing blinders ... it sounded like a pretty good analogy. It sounded like a very accurate analogy. But Regulus had advised that those blinders be torn off, and that Harry might be the one to do it. Could he, though? Could he really walk up to his father and tell him to wake up and accept that house means nothing towards who a person was? Could he? Would he be brave enough to speak up? He wasn't really Gryffindor; he was Slytherin.

Harry groaned and rolled over. His ridiculous fear was causing problems left right and centre. Neville had given up his house to be with Harry where his fear would take him. Harry was giving up an open friendship with Alan for this. Maybe ... Maybe he could try it a little at a time. Maybe he could just tell his mother ... Lily would be much more reasonable about it; she was still friends with Severus no matter how much James disapproved; well, now that Severus had grown up. Take things one day at a time, and everything would turn out on its own ... everything would take care of itself, maybe ... Hopefully ...

III

Harry woke up in the library when Regulus came back and smiled, informing him breakfast was ready downstairs if he felt like eating; it was now nine. Harry muttered something unintelligible and curled up again, before Regulus left him be. A few minutes later, sleep was

elusive, and he finally got up, going and getting changed before facing the others at the table. With his own typical luck, his mother was remaining at Grimmauld with the Weasleys today, so his half-formed plan of the morning was still plausible. Neville, however, wasn't talking to him and refused to sit by him, getting up and taking his half-eaten toast with him to go hide in the library. It wasn't obviously avoiding him – he'd already eaten breakfast and the toast was the last part of it – but Harry could see it for what it was.

Harry bit his lip as he ate, and then tailed his mother out of the kitchen into the drawing room like a sad puppy. Lily noticed it easily, and turned and smiled. They were alone in the drawing room, so Harry felt no shame going to her and hugging her desperately, wanting his mind to calm down. It wasn't listening, though. Lily finally just smiled and pushed him back enough to tilt his head so she could meet his eyes.

"You're feeling troubled, young man." She teased. "What has you in a dither?"

Harry couldn't smile, and gently turned his head aside. Lily's smile dropped and she pulled him to one of the chairs, sitting down and letting him choose to either take the other chair nearby, or sit with her. Harry compromised and sat on the floor in front of her. Lily leaned on her knees and waited. It was what she usually did when she suspected there was something Harry wanted to say that he wasn't sure how she'd react to. Usually it had been when he'd broken something and was afraid of a reprimand. Remembering made Harry calm down. He'd never been reprimanded too sharply after admitting something like that. This couldn't be worse than breaking Great-grandmother Evans' vase. Unfortunately, that had accepted a reparo quite well, and this wasn't going to fix so easily ...

"Mum ..." Harry tried. Lily gently ran her hand over his hair, an expectant expression on her face. Harry bit his lip again, and breathed carefully before he ducked and simply said it, "Mum, I'm ... kinda scared, because ... well, I overheard Regulus this morning when Dumbledore was trying to talk him into being the Defence teacher, and he told Alice that Neville seemed more Ravenclaw and Slytherin than Gryffindor, and Alice didn't mind because Neville had

already told her about his sorting and that and ... and I haven't ever told you that the –the Sorting Hat wanted me in Slytherin rather than Gryffindor, and ... I'm just scared ...”

Harry couldn't finish, but he didn't need to. Lily rose out of the chair with a faint, “Oh, Harry” and wrapped him into a hug. Harry hugged her tightly back, his fear and nervousness choking him. He didn't want to let go and see her face, didn't want to hear platitudes about how he shouldn't worry, he really was Gryffindor because that wasn't true, and wasn't what he wanted, and what would she think of why he was scared and would he have to say it all ... “Harry, it's alright. Houses don't matter, you're my son whether you're more Gryffindor or more Slytherin; I don't care. You're my son.”

Harry didn't want to consider whether he was crying about this or not. He settled for simple denial, and listening as his mother reassured him he was still loved no matter which he was more, Gryffindor or Slytherin ... they were just houses. If only his father could believe the same ...

After a few more minutes, Harry felt a little silly and a little more stable, pulling gently back. A glance at his mother showed an understanding smile, whether Harry believed the entirety of it or not. He smiled back, appreciating the support and wondering how he would now tell her he didn't want his dad to know ... and why. She apparently sensed he had more to say, and took the option of not speaking away rather thoroughly.

“Harry, you're nervous now. What is it?”

“Mum ... I'm scared, I ... don't want dad to ... know.” Harry finished in a whisper, and continued just as quietly, “I'm scared of how he'll react to me ... being more ... Slytherin than perfect Gryffindor ... I don't want him to ... to hate me.” He choked, and buried his head into her shoulder again. Lily gently stroked his back and murmured soothing words he didn't understand into his hair as he choked back several more sobs until he felt calmer and slightly deadened, and she finally answered.

"I won't tell him yet, Harry. You need to tell him yourself one of these days, but it doesn't have to be now. Thank you for telling me, Harry, thank you. You don't have to face him with this yet." Her voice was strangely hard, and Harry glanced up at her a moment feeling mildly in awe. Lily stroked his face and sighed. "Harry, I've never condoned your father's narrow-minded attitude towards Slytherins. Never. I dislike hearing him disparage Severus every time I speak with him, and his reaction to you being a parselmouth was despicable. It hurts that you're scared of him about this, Harry, but I understand. I can see why, I know what's so frightening. Thank you; thank you for telling me. But Harry, please." Lily leaned back and lifted his face again so they were eye to eye, Harry looking into green eyes as though looking in a mirror. "Your father will not hate you forever for this. He will probably be upset; he will not be happy, but he will accept it given time. He will never hate anything more than he loves you, and I know he will come around. As much as I understand your fear, I want you to face it and get it over with eventually. Not now, maybe not even this year, but eventually, alright? Promise me that you will eventually tell your father."

"I will." Harry answered easily. He wanted to tell his father eventually himself. But it wasn't going to be happening before Christmas, certainly. Maybe after he graduated ... "I'll tell him. He needs to wake up, or else he'll be no better than Mrs. Black."

Lily's mouth twisted in distaste and she hissed. "He wouldn't be, would he? No better than a blood supremacist. I wonder how he'd react to that."

Harry giggled, and then clapped a hand over his mouth. He had not just giggled. Lily giggled back, and Harry sighed and smiled wanly at her. "Thank you." He whispered, and Lily hugged him once more before standing, giving Harry her hand and helping him to his own feet, smiling at the difference, slight though it was, that left Harry slightly shorter than she was.

"I love you, Harry. Go make up with Neville about whatever you two were being irritable about."

Harry ducked his head, and left, hesitating before giving her a wide smile and jogging up the stairs to the library, finding Neville easily and slowing before walking over. Neville looked up with a scowl that lightened into puzzlement as he saw the hesitant smile Harry wore. Harry joined him cautiously and sighed before he spoke quietly. “I told her.” Neville’s head shot up and his amber eyes were wide in surprise, eyebrows near his hairline.

“You told your mother? And lemme guess,” He sardonically continued, “She had no problems with it, did she?”

Harry flushed slightly. “She’s friends with Severus, alright?”

“You could never seem to remember that before.”

“I was blinded by my father’s insistence. I’m over that, now. I won’t listen to someone who’s no better than a blood-supremacist.”

Neville looked up in surprise again, and slid his book closed over his finger. “You really got a changed attitude overnight. What happened to wake you up?”

Harry shrugged awkwardly, but had no way to avoid answering. Neville already knew about Alan and him being friends. “Regulus talked to me about it, and told me that he ended up screwed over because he only ever listened to his narrow-minded mother, and that he had to have his blinders ripped off before he woke up to find himself too deep to get out alive without a miracle. He … told me what happened for him to get the locket.” Neville was curious, but Harry shook his head. “I’ll just say it was a desperate act for him to do it, and he didn’t expect to get out alive. As it was, he finished with telling me my dad was much like his mother in ways, and … it scares me to think that that is true.”

Neville shook his head slowly and sighed. “It is scary. So your mum’s fine with it, and you’re waking up, then?”

“Yeah.” Harry allowed. “I’m not so scared anymore. And even so, I didn’t default into Gryffindor for nothing.” Harry added with a small smile. “I had to have some courage for it to be allowed, didn’t I?”

Neville smiled, and then ducked his head. "Good to hear. Oh, and Harry?" Neville's smile was sheepish. "I wasn't fully truthful about my house. It was really an all out debate and I could have gone to any of the houses. I didn't just pick it for you, although that was a minor part of the reason. I like Gryffindor for what it is no matter what, you and your attitude or not."

Harry sighed, and reached over to mess up Neville's hair. "You're a brat, you know that?"

"Only way to be Harry," Neville grinned. "Only way to be."

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It wasn't two more days before they got their rather late Hogwarts letters. In addition to the Hogwarts letters, came the prefect assignments and some very excited students. They were handed out at lunchtime, and Harry smiled brightly as he pulled his open with everyone else, surrounded by the Marauders. When Neville picked his up, he smiled wryly before ripping it open and watching the heavy red and gold badge fall out. Hermione was similarly enthused, and the rest were unsurprised. Ron huffed,

"Does this mean Harry might get in less trouble now?"

Harry snorted, and Neville scoffed. "Yeah, right. He hasn't listened to me in the years previous. He's not going to listen to me now just because I made prefect."

"Certainly not." Harry allowed. He risked a glance towards Alan, and frowned curiously. Alan had not made prefect, which was almost surprising. It wasn't due to Snape; Alan was an excellent student, and responsible. He was the leader of his coterie, which was a significant portion of the house. However, Harry supposed it might have been for the same reason he was not prefect: Alan and he had gotten into far too much trouble, especially third year when they got into fights for show. Harry would have put his money on Blaise making it to prefect in Alan's stead. In addition, both Harry and Alan not making prefect might manage to mitigate possible arguments if neither of them were

given any extra status. Harry had no problem with it, and Alan's lack of reaction save for a small smile made him believe the same of Alan. All the better for the coming year.

Mrs. Weasley sighed happily and quickly magicked the soup into bowls, placing them down the tables. "Everyone dig in, in celebration of our wonderful prefects. We'll have to have a party when you all get back from Diagon Alley. Are you all going together, or just the adults?"

Harry, Neville, Ron, and Hermione and the rest of them as well turned pleading glances at their parents. They had been stuck in this house far too long, and none of them wanted to miss this trip. Hermione also spoke up,

"My parents gave me some extra money to get a treat for myself. I'd really like to pick one out. I was thinking of getting something for Crookshanks, too ..."

The adults sighed and glanced between each other before Lily pointedly turned to Severus,

"Will you be coming as well, Severus?" She asked. She ignored James' ugly look, and Severus' mouth twitched before he answered.

"I wasn't planning on it, but I suppose I should if only to accompany my son. I wouldn't wish for him to remain alone in such ... questionable company." Harry forced himself to not laugh as James looked even less pleased, and Harry then smiled and stood.

"Does that mean we're all going, mum?"

Lily glanced around at the group, and smiled. "So long as we'll have an escort of several aurors, I don't see why not."

Sirius laughed raucously. "When you put it that way, Lily-kins, do we have much choice? I don't want to be lynched."

James was busy glaring at Severus, and Frank and Alice easily agreed. Lily turned back to give Harry and the others a small nod,

and Molly quickly hustled them to their rooms to get ready. Harry spared a look back inside and found his mother eyeing James with a disconcerting look of displeasure. He felt a pang of worry that she might give him away in fury, but squelched it painfully and followed Neville and Ron to getting ready. If his mother had found a bone to pick with his father, that was her business. He'd trusted her with his secret, and if he couldn't trust his own mother, he was in deep shit.

III

The group going to Diagon Alley was one less than expected. Halfway through preparations, Lily's voice had echoed through the halls, exclaiming that James was a pureblooded inbred idiot without sense to fill a thimble before it was abruptly cut off with what must have been a silencing spell. The children were hesitant, but eventually they all gathered in the entrance hall once more, their Hogwarts letters firmly in hand, and curious looks on their faces. Harry was nervous, and Nanna was frowning at the door in worry, leaning on Melanie for support. Hermione and Ron had both offered gentle condolences, but Neville hadn't bothered. He knew what was scaring Harry, and he was of the opinion that Harry had to deal with it on his own. Harry actually preferred that attitude.

It was ten minutes more before the door was opened, and the spell removed, and Alice smiled up at them with only a faint trace of strain before beckoning them down. They walked in and found Lily standing by the floo and not talking, and James nowhere in sight. Harry went over to her immediately, and Lily just touched his shoulder with a faint shake of her head, and went back to silence, moving only to pull Nanna into a gentle hug and murmur comforting nothings to her, nothings Harry didn't believe for a moment, but were enough for the twelve-year-old girl.

Finally, everything was back together and seemed ready to move out, when Alan decided to break the silence with his quiet, plain voice,

"Where'd James Potter go?"

Lily answered curtly. "Home, until he can control his temper. Don't expect to see him soon."

No one else was willing to ask her to elaborate. Frank and Alice went through the floo first to the Leaky Cauldron, and then the children followed to begin the exploration of Diagon. It wasn't a long trip, but it was outside, and only mildly chaotic. In the end, they met at the only place to end a shopping trip with any child under eighteen and sometimes older, Florean Fortesque's. Hermione had gotten an enchanted cat toy as her 'treat'. Alice and Frank had gotten Neville several new books for his upgrade to prefect after he turned down a new broomstick and a familiar. Harry had seen Frank buying a fine chess set behind his back, but had said nothing. Harry had bought nothing new for himself, simply staying by his mother for comfort and feeling a little off balance. He hoped Quidditch would help him focus once he got to school; nothing else was giving him any peace.

He was also sitting close enough to the table the adults were gathered at to overhear their conversation.

"-behaving like that is liable to end in him getting fired. How does he get away with it?" Lily asked.

"Because most people agree with him, Lily." Severus grumbled. "He only dislikes Slytherins. He only loses his temper when someone lies to him, or evades his questions, although only if they're bad at it. He's quite blind to those more talented, but getting a rise out of him is child's play if you know his triggers."

"It's a liability!" Lily growled. "And I won't have it, not in my house."

"It's his house as well." Severus quietly pointed out. Harry suspected they were having the conversation with the others none the wiser.

"Not so much so, Severus. Harry was terrified when he found out he was a parseltongue."

The boy in question nearly coughed up his ice cream upon that pronouncement. Fortunately for him, Neville and Ron were busy talking Quidditch; he was the only one listening in on his mother's admission, and her table was similarly divided.

"That Gryffindor brat?" Severus asked. There wasn't nearly as much disgust in the question as Harry expected, almost simply surprise. "Why would he be afraid of that? It is a rare, and valuable gift."

"Yes, but it's a Slytherin, Dark gift, Severus. Don't forget that. And Harry was rightly scared; he stayed at school that Christmas out of fear."

"Nonsense." The return was toneless, obviously faked and with no meaning. He might as well said nothing.

"James was furious, wanting to know who would play such a trick on his son, who would dare fake something and make Harry believe that, make him out to be something so foul. And then Harry wrote that he was staying at school, and Neville validated it to be true, and James' denial became momentary anger and he got himself drunk, not wanting to believe it. Remember when I came that evening to visit for several hours? I was waiting out James' foolish tantrum. It makes me wonder why I married him at times, but if he would only grow up about that one thing ... One thing, Severus!"

"It's one thing most people never grow out of, Lily."

"It's wrong."

Harry closed his eyes and tuned it out. It was undeniable. His father was in bad need of waking up to reality. He hadn't known so much, and now he did, and he was beginning to see where Neville and Alan were coming from in calling him a fool. He'd been as blind as his father for many different reasons. He'd now lost his blinders; it was time for him to stand up and wake his own father to the same sore facts. Knowing he had people behind him, people who agreed ... people he'd been too blind to see ...

The thought of telling his father didn't scare him so much anymore. Harry wondered when he'd get to see his next in line fear. He was almost looking forward to it.

A/N: Thank you very much for the reviews I got; Riley, dear sir, was the number one hundred. big hugs Thank you! I hope you like this

chapter as well. I'm sure you can see we're almost out of summer, and back to the school year - and the classic adventures you always get with a Potter. See you next time I update.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Twenty-nine

The week followed with no more excitement than Alan's wide smile when Harry found a moment to inform him of his promise to his mother: that he would tell his father, eventually, of what should have been his house. It seemed to lift Alan's mood quite a bit, which almost made the whole house seem brighter. It certainly brought a skip to Regulus' step, and the good mood culminated in a mass prank during a group dinner that no one was really sure who'd instigated it: absolutely everyone at the table ended up with silver hair, and the tablecloth was turned bright yellow. The confusion stemmed mainly from more than half those present not really caring that it had happened. James was completely confused, as he was blind to the concept that Fred and George would have hexed his hair silver, and Severus, while being disinclined to prank, had immediately glared at a very innocent looking Regulus who in turn blamed the twins. The confusion lasted for nearly a half-hour, with Lily laughing at her husband's plight, the twins getting yelled at by their mother, and Alan and Regulus disappearing upstairs.

However, it was soon September first, and the day was started with Harry and Neville stepping out of their bedroom and immediately having to dodge the twins' flying trunks. Harry pulled Neville down as the trunks flew past, and Harry hollered "Incoming trunks!" down the stairs. He heard several gasps and a loud shriek; one of the trunks thumped against the wall, and the twins ran past with pale faces. Neville cussed them out as they went by, not lapsing in his fervour until Alan scoffed above him.

"The language in question there isn't really welcome, Longbottom. Perhaps you should finish your washing up a little better before you continue downstairs."

Neville straightened his robes and smiled grimly. "I'm clean enough, Prince. But by all means, lead the way. Expendables first, I believe."

Alan allowed him a wryly amused look before he continued down, and Harry gave him a small smile before Ron opened the bathroom door. The look vanished as Ron's face twisted into an irritated glower, and Prince swept down the stairs with ease. Regulus quickly strode

past Ron, making him stop as he continued down. Ron grumbled angrily under his breath, but went into the room to double-check that he was finished packing. Harry and Neville had forced him to do so the day before as they checked that all of their stuff was together. Mostly it worked because they'd piled all his things on his bed and refused to allow him to clutter the floor again: the trunk was the only option left for stowing it all. Neville, however, had insisted upon breakfast before his own double-check, to which Harry joined him for the mass confusion in trying to get out the doors. The only thing really going for them was that they weren't very far from King's Cross.

Getting down the second time, however, was preceded by an angry inarticulate scream Harry was fairly sure was his mother's. He exchanged a quick worried look with Neville, and they both ran out and down the stairs. They passed their sisters on the way down, and then Regulus stopped them in the entrance hall, Alan glowering at the kitchen stairwell beside his father.

"Don't go in quite yet. Your father came back from pouting at the ministry in a worse mood and delivered some bad news about the Minister's newest headache. I didn't go down to listen, so I'm not sure what it was, but ..." He grimaced. "As you heard, apparently your mother didn't take it well."

"Didn't take it well?" Alan drawled. The expressions Harry and Neville wore commiserated. "I'd rank that a little differently."

His words were followed by him wincing, an action all in the entrance hall copied as the door below was slammed open, and Lily stepped out with her eyes blazing. Severus immediately stepped forward, expressionless, but speaking calmly.

"Lily, I can see you're mad. What news did the minister drop this time?"

"Other than requesting once again to be able to not have you defy him in his desire to question your son? He's called in that the aurors who normally have the day off to see their children to the Hogwarts Express are to treat this as a regular day and attend to their schedules, save for the women with school-age children. That means

that we have only myself, Molly, and Alice to see the children to King's Cross rather than all of us. That fucking tightwad. Fourteen years he allows it, condones it even! But as soon as the danger becomes a possibility, he calls it off. I can't believe we have such a moron as Minister."

"Lily ..." Severus sighed, and watched her with a calm expression as she slowly managed to calm herself down as well. "There's not a chance of talking him out of it?"

"It will take time for James and Frank to lay on him and force him to wake up. It won't help us right now, and I really didn't want to have to take all of them myself. Me and Alice and Molly ..."

"Regulus can go with you, Lily." Severus decided. "My son can deal with it. Regulus, kindly do so?"

Alan had stiffened when Severus decided that, but determinedly shrugged himself back into calmness. Regulus had reacted similarly when addressed, but he just ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Severus, I really don't want to show my face where Lucius might be ..."

"Wear a hood." Severus ordered.

Regulus frowned. "And what kind of suspicion do you think that would draw?"

"Then put on a headband and act like you're working. I have to get back to Hogwarts shortly."

Alan snorted and Regulus simply gaped at Severus for several moments. Finally, he picked up his jaw and shook his head. "Geoffrey needs to be fucking shot for telling you that. I hope he gets raked over the coals by Ginger back in America. I can't believe he told you that!"

"Regulus, will you go or not? I have to leave in a few minutes; will you leave Alan to go alone with these Gryffindors?"

Regulus glared a moment longer at Severus, and then eyed Lily's curious stare with resignation. "Neither option will get her to calm down, so I might as well come along to answer the numerous questions you will have brought up since you'll tell her everything you know anyways." He turned to ascend the stairs, and Lily finally found her breath enough to speak.

"Wait! What is your work?"

Regulus turned to shoot a glare back at Severus, and answered with dignity, "A stripper in a muggle club."

He went back to ascending the stairs without reacting to Lily's gaping mouth. Harry himself was startled. Alan hadn't told him that.

However, no one was really willing to elaborate until Regulus returned, so Harry and Neville were sent to fetch their trunks and return, Harry with Hedwig in her cage, and Ron in tow, well before Regulus came back down. In fact, Regulus managed to wait until everyone was gathered below and waiting for him before he came down. Harry and Neville, noting that Alan wasn't offended and feeling like Gryffindors and highly amused, had made sure to spread the news that Regulus worked as a stripper to everyone, so all eyes were on the stairs as he strolled down. Harry immediately saw why Severus had suggested what he had, though. He almost didn't recognize Regulus, although interestingly enough he resembled Sirius more now than he had before. It was just a change in the way he held himself; he looked ready to act like the Marauder Harry knew in a moment, rather than the pureblood heir he'd appeared as before.

Harry noticed him pause upon seeing the gathering, and his bearing changed subtly as he gave a rolling stride down the steps, brushing his hair back into the controlled mess behind the rolled bandanna he'd tied on. His clothes were now aggressively muggle as well: very tight jeans and shirt. Harry wondered how on earth he'd gotten into them; they had to be too tight to be comfortable. How could he even walk? A stifled giggle came from behind him, and he glared shortly at Melanie, who shrugged unrepentantly and whispered to Ginny not quite quietly enough,

"I can see him stripping now; that makes him look really hot."

Both girls dissolved into giggles and Harry rolled his eyes to look at Neville before he sighed and gave his mother a beseeching look. He stifled his annoyance when she had to tear her own eyes from Regulus with a wry smile and then gave Harry her full attention, only blushing mildly at his reproachful look.

"Mum, do we get shrinking charms again this year?"

Lily smiled brightly. "Oh, definitely. I want you all to have your wands free in case something goes wrong, and you all need to have a pocket for your trunk so you can keep it with you. Everyone, come along. Alice, can you get some of them? Regulus, can you ..."

"No, I can't, Lily. I'm no good at shrinking charms." Regulus admonished stiffly. Apparently no matter how comfortable he appeared, he simply wasn't. But it was really good acting.

Harry stifled a smile at the exchange, and waited his turn. Molly made another hustling sigh, and shortly thereafter, they all stepped outside into the sunlight, Harry smiling brightly at Neville. He couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts.

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Getting onto the train went fine. They arrived relatively late, and their trunks were quickly resized. Regulus had followed with a sullen step, probably aided along by Lily's peppering him with questions about his work. Once at King's Cross, he'd immediately drawn Alan to find a compartment so he could get out of the area; being surrounded by the hustle and bustle apparently unnerved him. That, or it was the stares he was drawing in bucket loads, despite the long leather jacket he'd donned. However, Lily had also been nervous, and she had wasted no time in working with Alice and Molly to shunt them all onto the train with abbreviated goodbyes, shortly waving them off. While Harry knew he would miss her again this year, he wasn't too upset about leaving; he was feeling stir-crazy with not being able to fly, and was looking forward to immediately being able to get on the Quidditch pitch once at Hogwarts.

The train left in short order, and Harry sighed easily in the aisle, sending a wry smile to Neville. “See you after the prefect’s meeting, then?”

Neville grinned. “Course. Save me and Hermione a seat, right?”

“Course, Neville, course.”

Neville quickly stepped off, and Harry smiled at Ron. “Where to now?”

Ron shrugged. “No clue. All sorts of places could be full. We’re really late.”

Harry huffed. “Well, let’s start looking, then.”

Looking didn’t gain them much, however. Most compartments were full. Melanie, Ginny, and Nanna were willing to let them join them in their compartment with Luna Lovegood, but Harry didn’t want to bump out Neville and Hermione, who wouldn’t be able to join them. Ron nearly picked a fight when they glanced in on Alan and his friends, but finally, after having to backtrack towards the front again, they found a nearly unoccupied compartment where Susan Bones was sitting alone. Harry felt a slight blush touch his cheeks, and Ron finally just rolled his eyes and elbowed Harry aside to speak up.

“Susan, are you expecting anybody to join you, or can we come and sit?”

Susan looked up with surprise, and Harry felt mildly relieved when she seemed to colour slightly as well. It wasn’t his fault fifth year agreed with her.

“No … well, Hannah might come in and join me once her prefect’s meeting is done. Otherwise, there probably won’t be too much. Sally-Anne and Quinn usually sit with Lisa Turpin on the way back, and I’m usually with Hannah, so …” She blushed even brighter. “Sorry, babbling. Please, come in. Where’s Neville, Harry? And Hermione.”

“Prefects.” Harry smiled. “They’ll be up there chatting with Hannah, most like. Do you know who the male Hufflepuff prefect was?”

“No … probably either Ernie or Justin, though. Casimir Matthews spends more time in the library than a Ravenclaw but never gets really good grades, and Hopkins is too busy trying to figure out how Ron’s brothers manage to get into all that trouble and not get caught.”

Harry grinned. “I can’t figure out how they do it either. Hey, Susan? What does your aunt know about Fudge calling all the aurors into work today?” Susan’s aunt was his father’s superior; he wasn’t just making conversation, it was valid.

Susan’s face coloured slightly, but this time it was with anger. “Oh, it’s just awful, really. Fudge doesn’t want people to think something’s wrong, even with what happened to Prince last year. He’s convinced Dumbledore came up with the whole mess himself, or that Prince’s lying.”

Harry stifled his fury, and merely frowned. “That’s stupid. He’s been allowing them the day off to watch the train since the end of the war was announced. Why would he cut back the moment danger might return?”

“My aunt thinks he’s probably scared of Dumbledore, really. He thinks Dumbledore is trying to upset the status quo and take over the ministry.”

“How could he suspect that Dumbledore would fake what happened with Prince?” Ron growled. “Slytherin or not, I saw him get carried out of the maze. He was covered in blood! Dumbledore wouldn’t do that; it wasn’t faked.”

Susan leaned forward with a serious expression. “He thinks Dumbledore might not have faked it, but –supposedly- he might have set it up. After all,” Susan leaned back and put on a sardonic superior expression, “Prince is just a Slytherin after all.”

Harry felt his eyes grow cold. “That’s a stupid stance to have, discriminating based on a house.” He growled.

Susan tossed her head angrily and sighed. "My aunt is furious with him. She came to visit and mother let her just rant and rave for hours after Fudge had expressed that thought. Dumbledore would never let one of his students come to harm. Fudge even went so far as to bring up that ..." Susan gave them both careful looks before continuing, "Snape had been a spy in the war, so if the father was expendable to Dumbledore, why not the son. Simply awful accusations. I certainly won't miss Fudge once he's out of office. With how my aunt is reacting, I don't think it will take long."

"If she's taking him out of office," Harry offered, "She'll have my father, godfather, and Neville's parents behind her."

Susan smiled. "Good to know. My aunt also added that Fudge was trying to pull Hogwarts under his thumb with some strange legislation. Dumbledore just barely avoided it."

"What was that going to be?" Harry asked.

"Something to do with the Defence position, I believe. I don't really know, she didn't go into it, but she wasn't pleased with it at all, and warned me to not complain about the teacher he did get. She seemed amused by it, though, so I'm not too concerned."

Harry frowned, and remembered that Dumbledore had tried asking Regulus to take on the Defence post. Who might he have found after that? Remembering the books, Harry had to cut back a wry smile. If it was whom he thought it was ...

"Politics suck." Ron offered. "Do either of you want a game of Exploding Snape, or something?"

Susan brightened, and leaned forward eagerly. Harry rolled his eyes and joined them. They'd get to Hogwarts soon enough.

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The food trolley had passed by, along with most of the first hour, before Hermione and Neville found their way into the compartment,

following a bemused Hannah. It was most entertaining to see her blush upon noticing that Ron was in the compartment. Ron, for his part, turned the famous Weasley red and stood. Hannah laughed nervously into her hand, and went to sit next to Susan, who blushed herself as Hannah raised an eyebrow. Hermione and Neville smiled and Neville flopped into the seat beside Harry as Hermione sat beside Hannah.

“Prefect meetings are dull. And I can’t believe the Slytherin prefect. Harry, take a guess.” Neville gave him an exasperated look, and Harry thought for a moment on how he was acting before he stifled an amused smile and said gravely,

“Zabini?”

“Yes!” Neville rounded. “With Greengrass too.”

Harry was certain Neville said that just to make him choke; he certainly succeeded at it, at least. Susan chose to look to Hannah, then, and ask,

“Who’s the other Hufflepuff prefect, Hannah?”

“Ernie Macmillan.” She answered. “Ravenclaw have Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein. I don’t know much about the two Slytherin prefects, but I don’t think they’ll be as nasty as Malfoy might have been. Zabini seems mostly disinterested in everyone else, although Neville and him seemed to have some sort of male bravado issue.” Her voice went up on the last, and Susan and Hannah ended up giggling as Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry broke in to ask for elaboration,

“What happened there?”

Neville coloured slightly. “Well, it wasn’t anything really. Nothing much, at least.” He refused to elaborate, and Hermione had nothing to say herself. Harry just sighed, staring out the window once more, and then finally the drinks got to him, and he stepped out to stretch his legs and find the loo. On the way back, he passed Alan’s

compartment again, and found Draco standing outside with a malicious smile.

“You feeling clever bringing your godfather back here to Britain, Alan? He wouldn’t be stepping so lightly if it wasn’t for that ruddy American who always manages to step in for you.”

“Draco, if you’re so thick you can’t see anything in front of your own nose, get out.” Alan drawled.

“You certainly don’t look like you’re that safe here now. I see you didn’t make prefect; daddy doesn’t care enough about you to give you the status?”

“No, my father wasn’t stupid enough to set me up to fighting with Potter if he made prefect. I notice you didn’t make prefect either. Did one of your bookends manage it? No? What a pity.”

Draco stiffened, and finally growled. “You’re not so great when you’re screaming on the ground are you? Wonder if your father spares you the cane.”

Harry stiffened as a long moment of silence befell the compartment within. He knew exactly what Draco was talking about, and was debating whether he should wait for Alan to hex him, or whether to hex him himself; he stopped, however, when Blaise strode past him, Daphne on his heels. Blaise immediately grabbed Draco’s shoulder and slammed into the wall with a growl.

“I’ll recommend you for detention once we’re at Hogwarts, Draco. Now get your scrawny arse back to your own compartment before you get your beloved daddy in trouble as well and he sends his own regards. Scram, or I’ll make it two fucking weeks!”

“You can’t –“ Draco began, and then fell silent when Blaise shoved his prefect badge in his face.

“Prefect, Draco, I made prefect so watch your fucking step and get lost. Maybe you should think before you open your goddamn mouth.”

Draco fled, and Blaise turned to glare over the people staring at them. “Get back in your own compartments, this isn’t a bloody show.”

Harry gave Blaise a minute nod and received a gentle acknowledgement in return. He strode quickly past, and then tripped over something he couldn’t see just beyond. Harry spun and glowered darkly at Draco when he saw him there. Draco hissed, “No daddy watching you off on the train today, is there?”

Harry growled, and dusted himself off as he stared up at Draco’s laughing eyes. “Maybe you should be a little more careful while you’ve got the bloated buffer Fudge gives you. Once he’s gone, your dad is getting a one-way ticket to Azkaban.”

Draco’s face darkened, but he silenced as Daphne called out, “Draco, aren’t you in enough trouble? Just go hide in your compartment till we get to Hogwarts. I think you’ve given yourself enough of a bad start already; don’t worsen it.”

Harry smiled back, but Draco wasn’t done yet, and Harry didn’t have time to react as he was slammed into the wall; someone had grabbed him from behind! Stars burst behind his eyes, and everyone started shouting as he pulled his wand out quickly and shook his vision clear. When he could see, however, Draco was tied in ropes, and Daphne was screaming obscenities at the two trolls that followed Draco around. From one of the compartments nearby, Ginny had run over and was gently bracing his shoulder as Blaise eyed him with disdain overlaying true concern.

“Harry, are you alright? Those ridiculous buffoons! Ohh, I hope they all enjoy detention with Filch once we get there.”

Harry brushed her off and sighed, rubbing his sore head. “I’m fine, Ginny. Just a little stunned, is all. I’ll be fine.”

Ginny allowed him to brush her off but scowled still. “Well, fine. Just be careful and I’m telling Ron and Neville to keep an eye on you. You won’t be getting concussed on my watch.”

Blaise apparently couldn't keep a straight face and snorted before he walked over and put his hand on Ginny's shoulder with a coldly amused look at Harry. "Enough, Ginny." He allowed. "Just let him take care of himself. He's a Potter, he'll be fine." The tone was disdainful, and Ginny gave Blaise a hard look but Harry just nodded slightly and bid Ginny goodbye, thanking Blaise coldly for intervening. Ginny finally let him go, and he found his way back to his compartment, where a concerned Hermione was being held back from storming out by Neville.

"I'm back, and I'm fine. No matter what Ginny says." Harry announced, coming in and breaking Neville off from Hermione before flopping into his seat between Neville and Ron. Both turned curious looks to him, as did the girls on the other side. "I just got in a bit of a fight with Dr-Malfoy. Sorry, habit. Little twit that he is. Anyways," Harry rode over the odd looks; it wasn't his fault he'd hung around with Alan too much and picked up his habits! "Malfoy set one of his bookends to beat me around the head after we got into an argument comparing our estimable fathers. Which was also after he'd gotten himself scolded by his own house prefects."

"What did he do to earn that?" Ron asked.

"Poked at Prince's sore spots, from what I overheard." Harry returned, unable to stop a frown. Knowing that, he decided to elaborate on a why. "Honestly, the boy got himself really beat up, and Draco was mocking his injuries, I think. Probably because his dad gossiped to him about it."

Neville, knowing that Harry likely wasn't speculating, turned angry as well. Susan had her hands to her mouth, and Hannah and Hermione were both pale. Ron was turning slightly red, his hands clenched angrily.

"That –" Hannah yelped, and Hermione slapped Ron's knee for his language. Ron glared at them. "It's true! Slytherin or not, Prince got hurt and he had nothing to do with it! Malfoy's dad was a Death Eater; everyone knows it! So he probably did have something to do with hurting Prince, and that little scumbag decides to throw it in his face? It's stupid and cruel!"

"Yes, but there's no proof, and I doubt Prince will be speaking up about it anytime soon anyways." Harry threw in. "So it's still all speculation. No matter how thick the evidence seems."

Susan nodded sharply, in contrast to her white face. "Yes, there isn't any solid evidence. My aunt would really like to talk to Prince herself, but Snape didn't respond to any requests for it. I don't think she's given up on asking, though. His words could really benefit pushing Fudge further out of office if he can better collaborate Dumbledore's words. Dumbledore was really the only one who got to ask him about what happened, you know. Having him there when the questions were asked is giving Fudge leverage in saying it's all a trick by Dumbledore. His American guardians didn't help matters any either; everyone's calling them bloodthirsty warmongers. My aunt said someone tried offering the thought that Dumbledore and the Americans are in it together. We got a lot of suggestions of who might have been willing to perform t-torture." Her voice wavered on the end, and Harry scowled.

"Well, I believe Prince." Susan and Hannah looked at him in surprise; Hermione, Neville, and Ron were startled as well, albeit for different things each. "I don't think he made it up for attention; he's not the type. And I know Prince hates Dumbledore; if it had been Dumbledore behind it, he'd have brought it up immediately and torn him down."

"But ..." Susan bit her lip a moment, and then continued, "I'm not saying I believe this stance, but say that someone said Prince's guardians were in on the trick as well and Prince's father was being held hostage."

"My father worked with Prince's guardian a lot after second year and again at the World Cup." Harry returned calmly. He knew where she was coming from. "His uncle likes Dumbledore even less than Prince does. And Dumbledore wouldn't risk angering them by holding Snape alone; Prince's guardians are the Alfaerus."

Susan looked thoughtful for a long moment, and sat back in her seat. "My aunt did have a bit to say about them after that. I can certainly

see a war-hungry complaint with how violent they were, but I gathered they were really protective of their own as well; they had a lot of their children at the World Cup, my aunt remembers. They wouldn't let Dumbledore torture Prince without retaliating and retaliating hard. My aunt suspects they were in on Rita Skeeter's death as well. I guess your stance makes sense ..." Susan didn't exactly look happy with that discovery, and gave a worried frown. Harry leaned forward and touched her knee, gentle but earnest. Needing her to believe for Alan and the future.

"It's scary to think that Dumbledore's right about Voldemort coming back, but wouldn't you rather have as much warning as possible? Fudge is making the atmosphere perfect for him to gain power and stability before making any stance. Dumbledore and my parents are working to destabilize him as much as possible right now, but fighting two fronts isn't making things easier on them."

"I understand." Hannah added.

Harry felt his cheeks flush and he quickly pulled his hand off Susan's knee, only noting for a second that her face was as red as his was as he looked anywhere but at her. A soft chuckle went through the compartment, and Hannah coughed lightly before continuing, her tone almost hiding her amused state. "I'll be sure to talk to my friends about believing in Dumbledore rather than Fudge. Most everyone is scared, though, of what believing Dumbledore would mean, and they much prefer Fudge's state of denial. It would help if Alan would say something in a space other than tucked behind Dumbledore's wing."

"And who's going to suggest that to him?" Ron scoffed. "Oh, wait! Let's have it be a Gryffindor or Hufflepuff trying to talk politics to a bunch of Slytherins. We'd have better luck going through a Ravenclaw."

Hannah and Susan exchanged looks. Susan chewed her lip a moment. "Virgil Spinks might listen, but no one outside his house likes him all that much. But he is planning on going into Wizarding law."

"Wouldn't Kevin be better?" Hannah returned. "He's thinking about reporting, and I think he usually partnered Theodore Nott in Charms before Nott broke from being neutral to side with Prince. Now Tracey Davis usually bumps him out."

"Either or." Hannah offered. "But that's about all that I know in Ravenclaw. Lisa mostly runs all the girls there, and I've never been 'cool' enough get in with that group. Neville, you took Padma to the ball ..."

Neville immediately raised his hands in defence, and Susan brushed the idea off without him speaking. "Neither Harry nor Neville get along with the Patil twins. Don't you remember? Sally-Anne spent nearly two hours going on in our dorm about how ridiculous it was that Neville ditched Padma at the dance."

Hannah touched her chin and stifled a smile. "Susan ... I don't listen to pointless gossip."

Susan coloured slightly. "Lucky you; I've got a bed right next to her, so not listening is nigh impossible. Besides which, I don't think any Slytherins would listen to a bunch of gossip-mongers anyways."

Harry stifled a desire to laugh; Susan would not appreciate it at the moment, and looked out the window at the dimming light. "It's probably about time to get dressed; we should be arriving soon." He offered.

Susan quickly took him up on that and stood to work on fetching the robes and getting them on. Hannah, Hermione and Neville all pinned on their prefect badges and Neville gave a short salute before abandoning the others to keep a hold of the few pets between them. Susan was perfectly willing to hold onto Crookshanks for Hermione for the time being.

The prefects left to supervise the rest of the students disembarking, and Harry himself kept with Susan and Ron as they made their way out and towards the carriages. Harry smiled at the sight, and then frowned when, instead of Hagrid's great voice, he heard another person, brisk and female, calling the first years. A look that way

showed him professor Grubbly-Plank, who had shown up the year before to cover Hagrid's classes while he'd hidden himself away due to Rita's articles. Harry didn't dwell on it; he was probably still doing stuff for Dumbledore, no doubt. His parents would have told him otherwise. Besides which, he'd almost lost Ron and Susan in his distraction, so he quickly pushed his way through the crowd to find the carriages, and the very tall Ron, who was on the lookout himself for the rest of their group. Hannah came upon them at about the same moment Harry did, both smiling and turning to the others. Ron frowned at Harry.

"What's with Professor Grubbly-Plank being here? Where do you think Hagrid is?"

Harry gave Ron a severe look and then distinctly shrugged. "No idea. Dumbledore probably knows, though. We'd have gotten news if something had happened to him." The less than subtle hints shut him up, and Susan and Hannah nodded as though they too understood. Harry had made it an easy excuse: everyone knew that Dumbledore knew everything, after all. What's the little matter of one teacher at his school?

Fortunately for Harry's attitude, Hermione soon found her way over, but Neville was apparently waylaid by something Harry couldn't see. He just abruptly stopped by the carriage shafts, staring with apparent dislike at something Harry couldn't see, and then he stepped sideways and around, glaring back at the carriage. When he arrived at the others, he ducked his head slightly, and immediately cut off any questions,

"Which carriage you want to get in? They're filling up, you know."

Harry frowned, and then pointed to one farther ahead; the Hufflepuffs went first, and Harry fell into step with Neville as Ron and Hermione fell behind them. Neville pointedly did not look at Harry for a moment, until they came alongside the carriage shafts once more; then, he quickly looked back across at Harry. Harry finally began his question, when Neville abruptly yelped, and swatted over his right shoulder. Harry would have commented, had Neville's hand not abruptly stopped as though pressed against something, and Neville growled.

"Look here, buddy, just stop nipping at me. I don't care how interesting I smell or whatever; go back to work. And stop- making-people- stare!"

Harry blinked for half a moment, and then abruptly made the connection: Neville could see whatever was pulling the carriages. What it was, however, evaded him. However, apparently the carriages weren't quite so horseless after all ...

"Okay then, would you like to skirt them a little wider?" Harry offered. Neville winced, but nodded and went to Harry's other side, Harry leading him over to the next carriage and again putting himself between the shafts and Neville. Neville gave him a small smile, and climbed in behind Susan and Hannah, Harry following and Hermione and Ron after him. Once they were all in, the carriage started moving, and Harry looked his question at Neville. There was only one question Harry would have at this moment, and Neville knew very well what that question was. He sighed, amused.

"Thestrals." He offered.

Harry blinked, and then tilted his head. Neville stifled a laugh in the silence, and shook his head.

"My grandfather, remember?"

"Oh." Harry understood; Neville had been playing in the sitting room when he was six or seven, and he'd been trying to get his grandfather to play chess with him. His grandfather had suddenly stopped reacting, and Neville had tried for a few minutes more before he'd started crying quietly. Augusta had been horrified, but Neville had easily understood what had happened after that. He must have seen the thestrals every year he'd been at Hogwarts. The others, however, didn't quite catch on. Hermione was the one to ask,

"What are thestrals, Harry?"

"Thestrals are rather frightening looking winged horses that can only been seen by people who have witnessed and understood death.

Neville can see them because he witnessed his grandfather pass away; I can't see them at all, and apparently none of the rest of you can either. Most of the students wouldn't, after all."

"Oh." Hermione quietly answered. "There is that, isn't there?"

Quiet laughter spread through the carriage, and Harry looked out at the carriages passing by, wondering what Neville saw when he looked at them. He wondered if he would ever be able to see them himself. A shiver ran down his back; to understand death like that ... it wasn't wholly a scared shiver, either.

The carriage arrived soon enough at Hogwarts, and Ron and Hermione both made the effort to look out the window towards Hagrid's cabin. There was no light, not even after they were out and heading inside. However, the brilliance of the Great Hall eased their concerns, and Harry and the rest bid Susan and Hannah goodbye and went to sit together at their table, by Fred and George, who immediately turned to them and asked,

"Who do you think the new Defence teacher is? There are two empty seats up there, and one extra. You see the pink woman sitting by Dumbledore?"

Harry looked and indeed there was a woman wearing the most prominent fluffy pink cardigan sitting and talking with Dumbledore. She had curly light brown hair with a horrible pink Alice band that unfortunately matched the cardigan. Harry felt an instant dislike that appeared to be mirrored in Neville and Ron's faces as well.

"I hope to Merlin that she is not our Defence teacher." Neville spat. "Especially if she's who I think she is. Mother mentioned a woman that horrible once. A ministry sycophant." Harry gave him a look, and Neville shrugged. "She might be Fudge's undersecretary. I desperately hope there aren't two squat pink undersecretaries in the ministry."

Harry nodded slowly. "I've got my fingers crossed, no worries."

Neville mimed wiping sweat off his brow, and Fred and George laughed quietly, waving them off before they returned to plotting with Lee. Harry leaned back in his chair and glanced across the Hall to the other tables. He caught a glimpse of Luna Lovegood's pale looks watching the Head table from her own seat, and then, past her, Alan was staring there as well and Harry mildly hoped that the ugly look he was wearing wasn't a portent of what kind of person the horrible pink cardigan would be.

His worries disappeared, however, when the staff door opened and Harry saw a familiar brown-haired American walk out, pause upon seeing the pink cardigan, and then smile like he was about to face torture and walk to sit in the empty seat next to her. The woman turned around to smile saccharinely at him; it appeared to be a competition as to who could look the most pained at this meeting. Finally, Geoffrey Alfaerus broke it off with an exasperated air and picked up his cup that was apparently unfortunately empty. He tapped it with his wand, and then set it back down with a huff when it seemed to not work, pulling out a small flask to drink from and get scolded for by the pink cardigan. Harry desperately wished he could hear the byplay. Neville, across from him, sighed happily.

"Okay, I think I can handle the undersecretary if the Defence teacher is him."

Hermione and Ron both glanced up, as did the twins, and the mood in their section lifted definitively. All of them remembered Geoffrey.

The staff door opened once more, and professor Grubbly-Plank came out and walked to Hagrid's traditional seat. Harry felt a short pang of missing the large half-giant, but distracted himself by looking forward to the sorting song. It came soon enough; the doors were opened to lead in the first years, and the line up waited with mild fear for their time to come. But first ...

"In times of old, when I was new,

And Hogwarts barely started,

The founders of our noble school

Thought never to be parted.
United by a common goal,
They had the self-same yearning
To make the world's best magic school
And pass along their learning.
“Together we will build and teach”
The four good friends decided.
And never did they dream that they
Might some day be divided.
For were there such friends anywhere
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Or was it the second pair
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw,
So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such good friendships fail?
Why I was there, and I can tell,
The whole sad, sorry tale.
Said Slytherin, “We'll teach just those
Whose ancestry's purest.”
Said Ravenclaw, “We'll teach those whose

Intelligence is surest."

Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those

With brave deeds to their name."

Said Hufflepuff, "I'll teach the lot

And treat them just the same."

These differences caused little strife

When first they came to light.

For each of the four founders

Had a house in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,

For instance, Slytherin

Took only pure-blood wizards

Of great cunning, just like him.

And only those of sharpest mind

Were taught by Ravenclaw

While the bravest and the boldest

Went to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,

And taught them all she knew,

Thus, the houses and the founders

Maintained friendships firm and true.

So Hogwarts worked in harmony

For several happy years,

But then discord crept among us

Feeding on our faults and fears.

The Houses that, like pillars four

Had once held up the school

Now turned upon each other and

Divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the school

Must meet an early end.

What with duelling and with fighting

And the clash of friend on friend.

And at last there came a morning

When old Slytherin departed

And though the fighting then died out

He left us quite downhearted.

And never since the founders four

Were whittled down to three

Have the Houses been united

As they once were meant to be.

And now the Sorting Hat is here

And you all know the score:

I sort you into Houses

Because that is what I'm for.

But this year I'll go further,

Listen closely to my song:

Though condemned I am to split you

Still I worry that it's wrong,

Though I must fulfill my duty

And must quarter every year

Still I wonder whether sorting

May not bring the end I fear.

Oh, know the perils, read the signs,

The warning history shows,

For our Hogwarts is in danger

From external, deadly foes

And we must unite inside her

Or we'll crumble from within

I have told you, I have warned you ...

Let the sorting now begin.

Harry sat still on his bench as the Sorting Hat subsided, his words ringing in his ears as he remembered back to his own nervous sorting so many years before when the hat had given him the option to go into Slytherin. His first regard was that Slytherin was more than a little barmy, but now as he listened, he realized the Hat didn't like the aggression between the houses; it hadn't fought him on going into Gryffindor after it had placed the seeds of a friendship between them. Now ... Harry thought with amusement of their dance competition last year, of Susan as his girlfriend there, and Luna as Alan's. That had been completely unintentional. All four houses, whether they were unfortunately tripping each other or not; it had all been in good fun anyways. But ...

"What a barmy excuse for a hat!" Ron whispered furiously. "Has it ever given a speech like that before?"

"Yes, it has." Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor ghost drifted between them and smiled. "The hat feels honour-bound to give the school due warning when it feels –" Nicholas cut off, and Harry glanced up to see McGonagall giving the school a widespread stern look, cutting off the many other murmurs and discussion going around. The sorting had yet to happen, so Harry sat back to listen and ponder what this all meant – and where the Hat had placed himself and Alan to begin with. It must have been anticipating this to put them together like that. It had mentioned that the houses shouldn't be divided then as well, and, hearing this, Harry felt mildly proud to have done as the hat required. It was most certainly somewhere his father had never gone before ...

Harry watched the sorting with disinterest, finally sneaking a look at the Slytherin table during it to look at Alan. He watched only for a moment before their eyes met. Even across the hall, Harry felt Alan slip Legilimency into his mind, and then back out again after glimpsing the very large three-headed dog glowering at him. Alan sneered and scanned back to the stool. Harry knew just how amusing Alan found his choice of shield for the thoughts he protected; Harry didn't even mind him calling him 'Fluffy' on occasion. It had been

enough contact for that evening, though, acknowledging they were both there and in one piece. Harry wondered if he'd caught the moment he'd been thinking of, of his sorting and their friendship. Knowing it was Alan looking, he hadn't hidden it; Alan had just done a scan and been scared off by Fluffy again because he looked too far. He just didn't like getting snapped at.

The sorting finished, and Dumbledore appeared completely undisturbed by the horrible pink thing seated next to him, looking past her to engage Geoffrey in light conversation before apparently giving up at his curt words and returning to discussing something that had to be several times less pleasant than Dumbledore made it appear. Harry shook his head in admiration, and turned back to Nick.

“So, what makes the Hat branch out like that?”

Nick straightened his head on his shoulders and sat back from watching Ron eat. “Whenever an outside danger has threatened the school, the hat will give warning like that, advising that the school unite from within in defence. It has done so several times that I know of.”

Ron looked ready to speak up, but Neville elbowed him making him choke on his mouthful of food. A bit red, he swallowed and then asked, “How does it know the school’s in danger?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Nick answered solemnly. “But the hat tends to remain in the Headmaster’s office, so it probably hears much up there.”

“Probably.” Harry agreed. “So it always insists upon improved interhouse relations?”

“That I know of.” Nick answered. Neville and Ron snickered, Ron looking a little pink as well. Neville cleared his throat before speaking solemnly,

“Now you have to ask her out, Ron. The Sorting Hat insists.”

Ron looked at Neville aghast, and Neville lost his composure under the scrutiny of his friends, laughing quietly before turning back to his food. Ron picked at it for a time; Harry was amazed a girl could put him off his food. Nothing else could.

"So it wants the houses to be friends, ..." Harry murmured. His mind continued with the line, I already knew that. "I'm certainly not buddying up with Draco."

Neville snorted. "Well, you seem close enough to it always calling him by his first name."

Harry flushed slightly; dammit, Alan was rubbing off on him too much. Ruddy American. "It's not like he's good enough to be called something so respectable anyways. Between Lucius and Draco, they've dragged down the Malfoy name; they used to be respectable purebloods, rather than money-grubbing butt-kissers."

Neville's eyebrows went up, and Hermione gave a small, shocked gasp. "You really do have an opinion, don't you Harry?" Neville offered slightly quietly. He then smiled warmly, and nodded to him. "And you're also quite right." He turned back to his meal, leaving Harry to feel a little nervous with the shocked looks of everyone who heard him. He had not meant to make that big of a statement.

His embarrassment carried him through the rest of the meal, and dessert, until Dumbledore stood up once more – to Geoffrey's apparent relief – and caught everyone's attention.

"Now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices. First years ought to know that the forest on the school grounds it out of bounds to students – A few of our older students ought to know that by now, too." Harry stifled a smile; Ron didn't bother and Neville ducked over his plate at Dumbledore's admonishment. Really, they'd only gone once during third year, he swore.

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me for what he tells me is the four hundred and sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other

things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch's office door.

"We have two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; We are also delighted to introduce Professor Alfaerus, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was a round of applause, which was surprisingly enthusiastic from both the Slytherin and Gryffindor tables; specifically Harry and Alan's groups. Harry knew Geoffrey would do very well, and Geoffrey was Alan's uncle; he knew exactly how well Geoffrey would do. Ron gave Harry a nervous glance, and Harry could guess why: Dumbledore had not given a time period of how long Professor Grubbly-Plank would be remaining. Harry felt a fine twinge of concern, but brushed it off. He had more important things to worry about, such as the pink-clad monstrosity still making Geoffrey appear to be trying to ignore something noisome.

"We are also pleased to announce a new position for Hogwarts from the ministry's behest. I believe the papers will hold the headline tomorrow, but beside me is Hogwart's first High Inquisitor, Professor Umbridge. Please treat her with the same respect as you would a teacher. I believe the article will clear up most other questions you may have."

He opened his mouth to continue, but a short, 'Hem hem' interrupted him. He glanced down at the small woman and Harry didn't see why for a moment until he took another look at Geoffrey who appeared to be mourning something. Harry then noticed she must have stood, as she gave Dumbledore a saccharine smile and stepped forward to begin speaking. Behind her, Geoffrey rolled his eyes and looked like he wished to repeat his behaviour when Regulus and Sirius had taken after each other their first day together at Grimmauld Place, but didn't wish to beat his head on the very nice plate. Others looked offended as well; Sprout's eyebrows were in her hair, and McGonagall and Snape looked almost related with their sour, thin-lipped expressions. Looking at Snape sent Harry's gaze to Alan, just as Umbridge thanked Dumbledore for his lovely introduction. Alan's face was almost priceless if foreboding had not settled into Harry's

shoes. He looked almost mortally offended and a little sick. Harry almost wondered why but Umbridge addressed the room and he looked up, startled at the simpering tone. He wasn't the only one; Neville was giving her an incredulous look. Hermione's was calculating. It was almost as frightening as when they'd worked to pick Lockhart apart second year; he never wanted that gaze aimed at him.

"I'm very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I'm sure we'll be very good friends."

Harry looked around to see a wave of murmurs and mutters flow around, and Neville looked mildly ill. Geoffrey, secure in sitting out of Umbridge's sight, made a gagging motion, and looked aside to cough quietly, swallowing hard shortly thereafter as though to defeat the urge to vomit. Harry couldn't help laughing quietly, a sentiment echoed by the twins. She coughed her disgusting little cough again, and then droned into a dull speech that immediate made Harry's hands curl into frustrated fists. He was so glad this woman wasn't a standard teacher. When she finished harping on the glories of the magical gift, she bowed to the rest of the teachers, and Geoffrey was the only one to give a sickly little twitch back. Harry wasn't sure if it was purposeful, or a convulsive reaction to his own disgust. His next reaction was when Umbridge said, "For our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering." The line made him give up on respecting the plate, and he sank onto his hands to rub his forehead before just laying his forehead on the plate. In front of Harry, Neville snickered, mildly strained.

The droning continued, losing the attention of most of the school beyond the teachers, -Geoffrey was the only one beating his plate there - and Hermione and possibly Neville. While Neville wasn't watching her anymore, he was playing with his goblet with a speculative frown and a disturbed expression. Finally, however, Neville looked up and started clapping. Harry blinked, and then realized that Umbridge had sat down, and Dumbledore was clapping before standing once more to finish his announcements. Ron hissed at Neville.

"Why the Hell were you clapping, Neville?"

"It ended." Neville answered distractedly, watching Dumbledore with a mildly confused expression. Hermione huffed from her spot.

"It was also quite illuminating."

"Illuminating?" Harry asked.

"Yes, she made a lot of accusations in that speech. Surprisingly, quite a few were about his ability to keep us safe, as well as teaching improperly."

Harry frowned and shook his head. "I'm not surprised at all."

Ron and Hermione looked a little lost, but Neville looked back at him with a shrewd expression. He knew what Harry meant. And he didn't like it either.

A/N: Yo. Thank you for the reviews I got. Back into the school year, and how they all deal with Umbridge ... and a few other difficulties, of course ...

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty

Alan was walking with his friends to the dungeons when a sharp whistle cut through the entrance hall. Alan quickly looked, and caught Geoffrey's curt gesture to move over his way. It didn't promise to be good, but as it was Geoffrey asking for him, his friends parted and let him go. Once he was within sight, Alan frowned. Both his father and his uncle were there, and standing at Geoffrey's elbow, almost literally in fact, was the ministry toady Umbridge. Geoffrey spoke before she could, something Alan appreciated.

"Ms. Umbridge has asked to speak to us in private, so I suggested Severus' office. Your father has agreed, so will you please come with us? I believe whatever she has to say pertains to you."

Alan nodded without speaking, and then gave Umbridge a small bow, indicating that she should go first. She gave Alan a sickeningly sweet smile, and followed Severus into the dark halls. She completely missed the wry smile Geoffrey gave Alan. Alan strongly suspected she wouldn't have caught on anyways. Or hoped. She just might be keener than he suspected. Better to overestimate her for the moment.

Alan decided to quickly pull astride his father and Umbridge partway down the hallway, keeping silent, but, upon reaching the office, stepping quickly before both of them and pulling open the door, holding it for them as they stepped inside. Umbridge gave him another sickening smile, although she did not appreciate Severus entering before her and making his way to his desk. Geoffrey and Alan followed her in, Alan standing out of the way, his hands clasped behind his back, and a blank but mildly attentive expression on his face. Severus looked like a bitter storm cloud and Geoffrey kept looking at the ceiling as though praying for patience. That, or he was hiding his expression.

Umbridge gave her simpering cough before starting. "I would like to extend to you, Alan Prince, the ministry's apologies for the lack of security at the Triwizard Tournament that resulted in your horrific injuries. Our trust was wrongly placed, and those wards erected tragically failed to perform as was needed to ensure proper safety of all those involved in what should have been a show of international

harmony. Your own trust, and that of your guardians, was shattered twice in these halls, first entering you in a tournament beyond your experience, and secondly allowing such damage to come to a minor entrusted to their care. The events at the end of last year should never have happened to one so young; such permanent scars..."

Umbridge stalled as Alan felt himself unable to stop a flinch; he didn't like being reminded of the pain. He almost cursed as she stopped, but thought better of it as she changed gears – for about five seconds, until he found what she was now trying for.

"While some will twist the reporting of the events, lying to suit their needs, the ministry is at your disposal, and will listen if you ever desire our support." Alan suppressed his sneer; like he'd believe they'd listen if what he said were not to their liking. How naive did they think he was? He'd seen the newspapers, thank you. "My door will always be open to you, Mr. Prince, so feel free to come at any time if there's something you need, or something you wish to tell me. If you feel in danger, further protections are not out of your reach, and the ministry is indebted to you for the sorry negligence you have been shown."

Alan found it in himself to nod slowly, still not choosing to speak. Let her think him meek after the torture. Perhaps it would grant him more leeway with her.

The gesture apparently pleased her, as she smiled saccharinely at him, to which he ducked his head again, and she reached as though to touch his shoulder. Alan exaggerated his reaction then, ducking away from it, and then not looking at her afterwards. Severus growled inarticulately, and Umbridge shot him a nasty look before addressing Alan again.

"I'm sorry child, I didn't mean to scare you. Please, if you ever need anything the ministry is at your disposal, and we are most apologetic for the damage that has been done. You'll see more of what I can do for you in the article tomorrow, dear." Alan nodded carefully again, and Umbridge looked between Geoffrey and Severus curiously before she smiled again and then nodded to all of them once more. "I'll leave you to your beds, then. Have a good evening." She gave Alan a bit of

an expectant look, but he didn't speak. Finally, she left, letting the door swing shut behind him. As soon as it was, Geoffrey hit it with a colourfully explosive spell, and then snarled.

"Horrible bitch, coming in here with that load of horse-shit."

Alan straightened from looking quiet and snorted. "I can't believe they thought I'd go for that speech. It was ridiculous."

Geoffrey nodded slowly. Severus spoke up, "Alan, are you alright? I saw her overstep her bounds with some of that ..."

"I'm fine. Half of it was beneficial in turning her speech; that last was purposeful in case you didn't notice." His sardonic tone made both of the men laugh; the gesture had been ridiculously obvious to them. "And I'm over the rest of it. She didn't catch much. Just ..." His hand quietly raised to touch his faintly scarred cheek; the dark nature of the spell had left it as a permanent mark and while it was nigh invisible against his pale skin, Alan still knew it was there. He was so lost in thought he almost didn't notice when Geoffrey stood and gently pulled him into a hug. Alan squeaked only a moment before he just leaned into it, ignoring the twinge of regret that his father never hugged him like this. Geoffrey simply sighed quietly.

"Alan, it's never going to get much better than that. Just don't dwell on it; we're stuck with this bitch until the Ministry grows a backbone, and you know how flimsy politicians are." Alan laughed quietly, and Geoffrey ruffled his hair before letting him go again. "We'll field everything we can, but be careful. Ms. Umbridge is to be treated the same as a teacher, but preferably with more caution as she's just itching for a fight. Be careful, and please remind your friends to be careful. I don't want to see you in trouble." Geoffrey waited until Alan nodded, and then smiled warmly at him and looking over at the still silent Severus. Geoffrey gave him a wry smile, and then yawned – it was almost convincing. "I need to get back to my room as well. Still feeling a little off with the time difference, and I have some lists I need to finish up, and to go over the lovely plan I had to write up to meet 'Ministry guidelines'. I'll see you tomorrow or something squirt, depending on your schedule."

Alan nodded, and watched him walk out of the office before turning to look at his father. Severus was sitting silently at his desk, watching Alan sidelong as he regarded the many questionable jars he had hanging around. Most of them were just for show, although in some esoteric potions they would be useful. However, the nature of the display had certainly given Umbridge some pause, as it did most everyone. Alan remembered Geoffrey's rather disturbed expression when he'd first seen the office. It was an interesting memory, for sure. However, Alan didn't want to stare at the bottles; he wished Severus would be less reserved with him. It was difficult trying to get the comfort he wanted from his father. Alan finally just sighed, and walked around his father's desk to his side, where he then wrapped his arms around Severus's neck from behind his chair in a loose hug, tilting his forehead against his father's hair.

Severus went very still for a long moment, and then sighed. "Alan, give me a minute."

Obediently, Alan let go, and Severus quickly sorted through several of his papers before he finally tucked them all aside, and pushed his chair back, standing and stepping over to gently pull Alan into a hug. Alan quietly returned it, knowing it was awkward for Severus but not caring all that much at the moment.

"You're always so demanding." Severus stated dryly. Alan shrugged without saying anything, and waited for Severus to end the hug. He certainly didn't want to.

It was several more minutes before Severus gently ushered him out, back to the common room. Having gone between Severus' office, rooms, and classrooms many times in the last few years, Alan found his way easily despite the late hour, and breezed through the common room to his own bed in the Slytherin dorms, which he was heavily grateful for the split rooms. Draco and his bookends had their own, while he shared with Blaise and Theodore. He just hoped they didn't mind him putting up silencing charms; he still had nightmares, and didn't want to wake them, even if he did have the amused sinking feeling that Blaise would not take kindly to being kept out ... Blaise was disgustingly over-protective at times. And he wasn't even allowed to mock him for it.

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Harry didn't know whether to look forward to the first day of classes, or wish he could hide somewhere. On the way down to breakfast, however, Harry saw Neville pause, and then stop at the notice boards. He clucked his tongue, and pulled down the twins' ad. Seeing them just exiting the stairs, Neville turned and thrust it at them with a wry look.

"Put it somewhere I can't see it, please. That is not allowed by the rules, and I will tear it down every single time I see it." Neville raised his eyebrow at them, and left. Harry gave him a short look, and Neville laughed quietly. "They're smart. They just need to hide it from us lovely prefects, and they can play as much as they like. I take my responsibility seriously to the point of the letter of the law. No further." Neville winked at Harry, and then lowered his voice. "Just don't tell Hermione that."

Harry shook his head, and looked away. Neville was head over heels, in his normal way. However, even his happy outlook did not detract from Harry's disturbed premonition that he was going to have to deal with the disgusting pink undersecretary sometime that day. Unfortunately, the paper delivered with breakfast only confirmed it.

Hermione got hers first, and then spat pumpkin juice all across it. Ron, beside her, quickly looked over and spat a rude oath. Finally, Harry just sighed.

"What does it say?"

Hermione sighed, and scanned the article before tossing it to Harry and Neville. "She's going to be watching all the classes to make sure the teaching is up to par – or down to it, I suspect – and ensuring they are staying within the 'ministry approved' curriculum."

Neville sighed, and pursed his lips, looking at the ceiling. "Man, her and Geoffrey are going to be at loggerheads from the first moment on."

Harry let out a small laugh at the thought, but it was a nervous one. What sort of treatment would they suffer at her hands? Why? He was so busy thinking, he was mildly startled when the twins came up, one putting his arm around Neville, making him squeak, and one leaning his arm most unwelcomely on Harry's head. Harry growled, and quickly shoved him off, glaring up at them.

"Hello, what was that for?"

The twin holding Neville grunted and let go, and they both stood back, hands raised with large smiles on their faces. "Worrying about the new Inquisitor?"

Hermione frowned, and Harry sighed. "Aren't you? She's probably going to try and make our lives Hell."

"Well, yes," One allowed,

"That's why we,"

"The Weasley twins,"

"Plan on returning the favour."

"Besides," The first returned, leaning closer to Harry and wagging his finger, "I'm sure we'll have a most willing partner in crime with our new Defence teacher, don't you think?"

Harry couldn't help his smile. "I'm sure you will. Don't get caught, else Neville and Hermione will have to be most stern with you."

The twins rolled their eyes in synch, and smiled. "I think they might be busy with other things." They grinned wickedly as both Neville and Hermione blushed, Neville managing to hold onto his stern expression. The twins both winked, and then continued as though they had meant to all along.

"After all, fifth year is OWL year."

"And the teachers just stack on the homework."

"You'll be begging for us to complete our products by the end of the year."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I'm not even sure I want to know what you might come up with. What if it's dangerous?"

Fred and George smiled. "We test everything already. That's what Neville interrupted earlier."

Hermione gave them a firm glare. "Just what did Neville interrupt?"

"Hermione," Neville drew her attention away, and smiled. "Just them advertising their products. Told them where to shove it, is all."

"Good." Hermione nodded firmly. "Thank you, Neville."

"No problem!" Neville grinned roguishly. The twins looked at each other with their own evil grins and wandered off.

Harry rolled his eyes and consulted his schedule. "And we've got History of Magic soon enough. Coming, lovebirds?"

Neville and Hermione coloured again, but both gathered their things without complaint, taking the lead as Harry and Ron fell behind, both exchanging exasperated looks of commiseration. The problems when your friends fall in love.

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Having History of Magic as their first class did not start the day off very well. As per usual, only Neville and Hermione stayed awake, although Neville had his nose in a book the whole time without Binns even noticing. Harry idly wondered if it was even the History text or not, but his thoughts drifted once more without guidance. Thinking of Neville's proclivity for using an auror level spell to get out of schoolwork reminded him of the animagi. Neville was doing very well on his; during the summer, he'd found time for the trance required to equate one's Animagus with oneself. Harry hadn't managed the time yet; he'd run interference for Neville during his, as the trance had

taken eight solid hours for him. The trouble was that it wasn't a standard time; everyone's was different. During the summer, Alan had grudgingly admitted to completing his transformation in its entirety before he'd even made it to Grimmauld, but it wasn't all that interesting to him, and he'd refused to show it off. Harry felt only mildly jealous; he'd manage his own soon enough. Alan's had taken him ten hours of trance, so Harry felt a sinking feeling his might be even longer. And the spell ...

Harry was shaken out of his contemplation by a grinning Neville. Harry quickly stood and made his way behind him out the door, where Hermione was waiting with a huffy expression. She just sighed and led the way to the damp courtyard, Ron following along behind them as Harry drifted once more. He snapped back to reality, however, when someone hailed their group.

"Ron! Harry, both of you!"

It was Hannah Abbot, and behind her were Susan and an amused boy in Ravenclaw clothes. Harry and his stopped, waiting patiently for them to catch up, and the two girls smiled warmly as Hannah spoke up,

"Hey, Harry, you remember how we were talking about Alan and him possibly clearing up the issues? Kevin agrees that You-Know-Who is back, and said he'd try and talk to Theodore about it and Alan speaking up for himself."

Harry smiled, thinking that that was rather unlikely someone Alan didn't know would convince him, but to have it come from one known source would make everyone else think his eventual agreement was more reasonable: Harry would be working on Alan himself. Ron, fortunately, kept him from having to modulate his tone into sincerity.

"That's great, Hannah! Thank you, Kevin. I hope you don't get too much flack from the Slytherins."

"It's fine, Weasley." Kevin happily allowed. "I like Nott; he's a smart kid. Nothing like the rest of them, the leaders, Malfoy and Prince.

They're really cold to anyone outside the house. I'm not sure how easy it'll be to get the message across, but it's a good point."

Ron nodded as well, and gave Hannah another large smile. Harry noticed Kevin's smile turn wry; he could see as clearly as everyone else that they liked each other. Susan sent a smile at Harry as well, and Harry felt a warm bubble rise in his chest as he smiled back and nodded slightly. He hoped she was the only one of them who coloured at that. Neville wouldn't let him live it down if he blushed right now ...

"What class do you guys have next?" Neville asked calmly, sending a smirk at Harry that let him know his hopes were in vain. He turned back to focusing on the discussion of classes before the point could get any worse for him.

They continued to speak until the bell came for the next classes, and then split, Hannah, Susan and Kevin to their classes, and Harry and his to Potions in the dungeons. Ron made irritable disparaging sounds at having to descend into the darkness to continue learning what he called a pointless subject. Neville snorted.

"Ron, you liked all the potions we learned over the summer."

Ron frowned. "That was because –someone other than Snape was teaching us." Ron caught himself before mentioning any names, but still frowned. "You know that. I don't learn the way this bat teaches."

Harry rolled his eyes and found Alan already seated on the other side of the room with Blaise and his friends, talking quietly. Harry followed the others to their seats and sat, getting out all of his things and wondering what Severus would throw at them this time around.

When class began, Snape stormed in as usual, his stern order of, "Settle down," being unnecessary for the class had gone dead silent upon the opening of the door. Still, he shut it firmly and stalked to the front of the classroom. Harry strongly suspected he was in a foul mood, as Alan himself wasn't even looking at his father but was instead fiddling with his potions instruments. It was not a promising beginning.

"Before we begin today's lesson," Snape spoke quietly, and threateningly, "I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some in this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to at least scrape an 'Acceptable' in your O.W.L. or suffer my ... displeasure."

He turned a glare on the Gryffindors, making Ron flinch, but Neville was clearly itching to do something cheeky and holding it in most likely for Alan's sake alone.

"After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me," Snape continued after no reaction came from the Gryffindors. "I take only the very best into my N.E.W.T. potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye." His gaze ended up on Harry's face, but Harry kept his expression neutral in a manner that would do Alan proud. It seemed to unnerve Snape who took a moment to continue. He seemed distracted, though ...

"But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell," He'd come to rest on Draco's bookends, and gave them a wicked smile, "so whether you are intending to attempt N.E.W.T. or not, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts on maintaining the high-pass level I have come to expect from my O.W.L. students.

"Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: If you are too heavy handed with the ingredients, you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometime irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing." Harry felt a small smile work its way past his neutrality. This was a potion Alan had badgered Regulus into going over with them. Harry suspected Alan knew Severus would bring it up, and that was probably why he'd done so. Thus, he knew how to do this one; Snape would be surprised. Heck, even Ron had done well on this over the summer.

With the ingredients and instructions on the board, Harry, Neville, Hermione and Ron went about their work with deep attention. As expected, it was a complicated, and fiddly potion with precise orders of timing and stirs. The ingredients were delicately balanced, and the heat had to be exact. With fifteen minutes left to go, people were moving quickly about in the rush to make sure their potions were warming properly. Harry, his fire lowered and potion looking a little off, took a moment to glance across the room at Alan. He was surprised that Alan's potion wasn't looking exact either, and, as he watched, Alan checked the flames with a frown, and moved to add the final ingredient. As he did so, however, he glanced at the board and his eyes went wide. He'd dropped in the ingredient and a virulent hiss screamed through the dungeon. With a yell, he knocked his cauldron over the front of his table, fortunately the front row, and then a dull explosion sounded. Alan and Blaise shot out of their seats, and Alan swore fervently. Most everyone's attention was distracted now, watching the scene. Alan had always been a perfect potions student; he didn't mess up. Snape looked across the classroom and barked,

"Attend to your potions before it fouls, fools."

Harry quickly turned back to his and added the final ingredients, listening attentively as Snape approached his son, speaking firmly but without malice.

"Prince, pray tell me what went wrong here."

Alan sighed, and growled something under his breath.

"Five points for language. You do not let your mind wander during class, Prince, much less during an O.W.L. potions class." It was more a reminder than a scold. "What happened?"

"I added too much hellebore, and then let it steep too long before finishing. It activated the poison and then ... exploded. I knocked it off so it wouldn't do so in my face."

"Very well. As you no longer have any potion, you will receive no grade today and I expect you to find yourself a new cauldron before next class. Zabini, is your potion fine?"

When Zabini told him it was, he moved back to the front of the class and checked the time again before firmly announcing, “There should be a light silver vapour rising from your potion.”

Harry looked at his own and grimaced. There was a little too much for it to be called ‘vapour’. It actually more resembled dry ice in water, except darker. A quick perusal of the instructions made him groan when he reached the third line. He’d forgotten to add his hellebore. The potion was ruined. Snape was also striding up the aisle before them and regarding the potions in view. He said nothing over Hermione’s, and then paused at seeing Harry’s.

“Potter, what is this supposed to be?”

Harry looked up at him with a frown; he sounded unusually malicious.
“The Draught of Peace, sir.”

“Tell me, Potter,” Snape asked with quiet venom, “can you read?”

“Quite well, sir.” Harry snapped, equally quiet. At the front of the room, Malfoy was snickering.

“Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter.”

Harry rolled his eyes and answered. “I already know I forgot the syrup of hellebore, sir. I’ve done this potion before, for practice.”

“Then you should know that this,” He indicated Harry’s cauldron, “is thus worthless.” Snape straightened, and abruptly vanished Harry’s potion. Harry gaped, shocked. Snape ignored him and turned back to the class. “Those of you who have completed your potions, are to fill one flagon with a sample, label it clearly with your name, and bring it up to my desk for testing.” Snape announced, sweeping back to the front of the room. “Homework: twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making, to be handed in on Thursday.”

Harry seethed as he cleaned up his station, furious that Snape would do that to him. Just because his son made a mess of his own work,

and screwed up because he was distracted ... Snape had never done anything that cruel to him before. Around him, Ron filled his sample with a furious glare, and Neville looked far too placid as he handed in his own, which had been of the same quality as Hermione's. They remained silent, however, and when the bell rang, Neville had to jog to catch up as Harry stormed into the Great Hall for lunch. It was almost a relief to look up and see the ceiling was a murky grey, with rain pounding at the windows.

Sitting beside him, Neville immediately sighed and spoke up, "I can't believe he did that."

"Neither can I." Harry fumed. "That was horribly unfair. One mistake. One! I knew exactly which one it was when he asked, I've made it fine before, but he had to jump on me just because he was in a bad mood. If he ever dares to do that to me again, I'm writing my mother about it and leave it to her to chew his ears off!" Harry ended with a slap on the table.

Neville laughed tightly, and saw Hermione and Ron finally making their way to the table. He lowered his voice, "Do you think Alan won't chew his ears off for it either?"

Harry gained a thoughtful look, and then managed a thin smile as Hermione and Ron sat down across from him. Both of them also offered condolences, but Harry reassured them that he was fine, and he'd approach his mother about it to make sure it never happened again. They accepted it, and turned back to their own argument with ease, leaving Harry to quietly wonder what might be thrown at him next. Finally, tiring of the stubborn insistence Ron had that he had not done anything wrong with his potion work, Harry stood and smiled wanly at them before announcing he was going to library. Neville brushed off the offer, and joined Hermione in picking apart Ron's potion making –whether he liked it or not – as Harry left the Great Hall and wandered slowly up to the library. Harry had a free period after lunch anyways. Neville and Hermione went to Ancient Runes, and Ron to Divination. He could only hope ...

After he'd been buried in the new Defence text, 'Lighting the Dark Side' by Vespasian Battaglia, for at least a half-hour, someone sat

quietly down at the table across from him. Harry didn't look, but jumped when whoever it was pulled his book down to the table. Alan frowned at him.

"Harry, I'm really sorry for what my dad did. He shouldn't have taken it out on you, okay?"

Harry quirked a small smile. "How'd you take him to task for that?"

"Reminded him you were Lily's son, and threatened to write her about him having a foul mood; I didn't like that he'd blown up at a half-decent student when he could have taken it out on Lavender or Draco's bookends. Called you a decent rival, and that you at least believed me. Lots of fancy words like that."

Harry gave a larger smile and then shrugged. "Well, we got the same grade for the day. Why'd you mess up?"

"Anger." Alan stated shortly. "That blown up bull-frog came to give me the 'Ministry's condolences' on my injuries and insinuated the lies they're still telling. How she had the gall to do that in front of Geoffrey, I'll never know."

Harry groaned. "She's inspecting classes today, isn't she?"

Alan frowned. "Yes, she is. Why?"

Harry laughed bitterly. "What are the chances of her not inspecting my Defence class?"

Alan closed his eyes and looked skyward. "Well, she'll either evict him by the end of the week, or be stuck with him. One of the two."

Harry openly crossed his fingers. "I pray he kills her in the worst way possible."

"Can't." Alan noted seriously. "Too prominent; Fudge would investigate losing his undersecretary more than just some spiteful reporter. Besides, Lucille wouldn't put out the effort if it's not a significant threat, so unless she does something significant she won't

spare the effort, and Geoffrey acting without clearing whatever it is with Ginger or the family... well, he isn't fond of those lectures."

Harry laughed quietly. "I never thought a man might be."

"Yeah ..." Alan sighed, checked his watch and then stood. "Well, enjoy the free period?"

Harry nodded slowly and smiled. "Yeah, I'll see you?"

Alan nodded quietly and left. Harry returned to the book. It was very good, after all. And it helped distract him from the likelihood that he'd be seeing a standoff between Geoffrey Alfaerus and Ms. Umbridge come next class. Although that might not be so bad ... There was a good chance of it being funny on some level.

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"This is an abominable amount of homework!" Ron groused. "A foot and a half for Binns, a foot for Snape and Trelawney assigned us a month's dream diary! And neither of you can tell me you didn't get any homework from your Ancient Runes class either!"

"Course not." Neville said, hefting his book and glancing at the paper sticking out from the front. "Ten inches for Ancient Runes. I'm almost looking forward to Arithmancy."

Harry laughed quietly, and both Neville and Ron turned to him with minor glares, Neville's more amused than anything. Ron pouted.

"Stop that, I hope you get plenty of homework for Arithmancy." Ron grumbled. "That's always got quite a bit, doesn't it?"

Harry shrugged, and looked forward through the halls for the door to the Defence classroom. "Not really. But who wants to guess how much homework Geoffrey will be giving us?"

"Harry," Hermione asked, "why do you always tend to call people by their first names? You do it a lot, and you keep doing it with Professor

Alfaerus." She emphasized the title. "You don't even know him that well. And you do it to Malfoy too."

Harry shut his mouth and tried to come up with an answer that made sense. He'd picked up the habit from Alan, honestly, with his upbringing and with all the stories he'd told he felt he knew Geoffrey very well. He knew Geoffrey wouldn't really mind, but ... "I guess I just picked it up from reading too much?" Harry offered weakly. "And do you really think Draco deserves to be called the title of such an upstanding name?"

Hermione stared for a long moment, and then nodded thoughtfully. Harry praised his stance on genealogy and hurried into the classroom. Hopefully Hermione wouldn't call him on it anytime –

"But why wouldn't you call Professor Alfaerus by that name if he's representative of his own line?"

Harry beat his head into his desk. Neville snickered beside him, and finally spoke up. "I think Harry spent too much time listening in on Reggie and Prince over the summer. I remember doing so myself, and they talked about the Alfaerus a bit. Harry looked it up; Geoffrey Alfaerus is the second youngest of seven siblings, five of who are male, one of which is his identical twin. His father is also still alive, and most all of them work in Salem Sorcerer's School. Trying to call for 'mister' or 'professor' Alfaerus just doesn't work. His father runs the school, two brothers and one sister are teachers there, and him and one other brother are researchers who are always on call."

Hermione was now staring with Ron at Neville who'd apparently done more looking into it than Harry had expected. It was not, however, surprising to Harry, that Neville had taken the time, nor was the information itself news. He'd learned it all from Alan. Everyone else who'd overheard was staring.

Hermione shortly asked a few more questions, something about not finding the books for it herself, but Harry was looking around for signs of what might happen. The room was plain at the moment. No major accoutrements, no indications of what kind of teacher he'd be. The desk sat looking almost deserted at the front of the room, and the

whole class had filed in, the bell rang, before the door was flung open almost a minute later. The chatter died as Geoffrey stormed in, followed by the ugly pink undersecretary. He went straight to his desk, and angrily shoved it back; the loud screech silenced the remaining murmurings. Umbridge flinched, and straightened indignantly.

“Professor Alfaerus, that is not the way to begin a class.”

Geoffrey whirled on her. “Dolores,” the name grated from his mouth, “I am the teacher today. You’re investigating. If I must tell you one more time to shut up and let me teach, you may indeed be my assistant as I demonstrate the proper usage of spells to these fifth years. However, as that is mildly inadvisable why don’t you sit over there,” He pointed firmly to a chair by the wall, “where you happily sat last class and wait and see just how I might treat this class. It would be greatly appreciated, thank you.”

He firmly turned away from her, and smiled tightly at the assembled students. “Well, sorry about the impromptu lecture. This is fifth year Gryffindors, yes?” There was a murmur of assent. “Well, nice to see you all. I’m sure you’ll hear this from almost all your teachers, but to remind you once again to pay attention in class – that is, to attend to me, not the High Inquisitor. While she is required to be in here, I would appreciate holding your attention without,” He flicked his wand and a loud bang made everyone jump in their seats, “having to force it. Paying attention is critical to Defence, no matter the circumstances. While Madam Umbridge is demonstrating the benefit of colour in drawing attention to oneself and creating a distraction, we’re not covering improvisation until Christmas time nears, thank you.” A small tittering swept the class and Geoffrey smiled. “Now, fifth year is the time of examinations. You all get to take your O.W.L.s, which will be a load of fun I’m sure. I’ve seen the list of things usually covered, and regarding what’s happened the years before you have a bit of stuff left to do to make up for two substandard teachers in your first years here. However, that should be fairly easy. O.W.L.s are easy, by my standards, but, then again, I’m one of those crazy Western idiots with pretensions above my station and a penchant for bloodshed. You do not necessarily need those skills. But just because you don’t need them now doesn’t mean you won’t ever need them.”

Umbridge coughed from her chair, but Geoffrey seemingly ignored her.

"We are all wizards here. Various backgrounds or not, we are magical and thus, long-lived. You all may very well live over a hundred years, easily. The world changes in a hundred years. There have been three wars in the muggle world. America, the land of the free, has rather firmly convinced several dark lords that trying anything on our land would be inadvisable. Britain has had two, one of which attempted to become immortal." Umbridge made another protesting noise from her apparently uncomfortable seat in the corner. Geoffrey still ignored her. "Other countries have had their own. Problems arise, people move forward. You may very well have to defend yourselves eventually in reality. As your teacher, I will teach you to be prepared to do so, but I will also cover when doing so is acceptable." He grinned suddenly. "As a note, it is not generally acceptable to be using this in the corridors, and if caught, Mr. Filch is more than willing to try and convince you otherwise. Any questions?" Umbridge opened her mouth, but apparently Geoffrey anticipated it, and clarified, "From the students first, kindly. Dolores, you may harass me once more later."

Harry, annoyed at Dolores, quickly raised his hand. Geoffrey smiled, and then frowned, before sighing. "One moment, I neglected to take roll. Lemme find the paper first, I have no clue who half of you are." He turned and disappeared behind his desk, rolling drawers quickly and efficiently –yank, glance, shuffle, slam- before he stood once more with a paper in hand. He smiled over them, and then called roll quickly. Harry impatiently waited, but noticed with interest that he gave no indication that he really knew Harry, or the other children who'd been at Grimmauld, any better than the others. Finally, he set it down with a smile, and turned back to Harry. "You had a question, Harry?"

Harry blinked, and then smiled remembering the American penchant for first names. "Yes, sir. Umm," Harry paused. Geoffrey had spent the entire lecture circumventing the point of the current war. Asking outright had just occurred to him to be a bit of a stupid action, and Ms. Umbridge would jump on it. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, but he needed to find a question. Inquisitive fifteen-year-old, son of an auror and vaguely familiar with the man ... "What kind of

experience do you have, and what do you do? You talk like you're ... I don't know, you remind me of our last teacher somewhat." Harry blushed shortly, but gave a sigh of relief as Geoffrey smiled warmly.

"I'm an auror in America, and a bit of a trouble-shooter. I like to think I'm not as hare-brained as Mad-Eye Moody, but I can see that I'm at least passingly similar. I do have a lot of experience; I've been helpful dealing with at least one person with delusions of grandeur, cleared out a few under-handed rings of crime, some wizarding mafia, and also some troublesome magical beasts that got it into their heads to terrorize the law-abiding folk. And then the usual common lark of tomfoolery, but that doesn't take much effort. Any other questions?"

Hermione raised her hand, and got a small smile and a nod.

"Sir, what will you be covering with us?"

"Classic O.W.L. prep from a nice book I found ... somewhere, plus a few non-conventional tactics that are easy to learn and use to keep oneself from getting injured in general."

Seamus' hand shot into the air, and he blurted his question, "Sir, do you believe that You-Know-Who might be back?"

Geoffrey blinked, and looked down, shaking his head. "As an American, I really have no opinion on the war at this time. I don't live here, and don't know all that much about your Dark Lord and whether or not he may have found a way to even be able to come back. He'd have had to have planned very well for it to be possible, and since your government seems quite certain his followers are all dealt with, who would have given him aid? I'm talking eventualities, not distinct possibilities.

"Now then, as this is the class, I shall start you out by checking that everyone has the required books. Well?" He raised his eyebrow at the general consensus sound, and then smiled. "Please bring them out and open them to the introduction. It's a succinct summary of goals that are wise choices for those seeking to understand how to defend themselves. Once you've gotten that read, I can give you a demonstration of some of my skills, and what I will be teaching you."

Geoffrey smiled once more, and turned to sit at the desk he'd shoved nearly to the wall, pulling out the chair and flopping into it. Umbridge stood and walked over to engage him in a hushed conversation that wasn't quiet enough to escape the notice of Harry and his friends, seated in the front row. Harry, Neville and Hermione, having already read most or all of the book, listened intently. Neville urged Ron to read instead, but ignored him thereafter to listen in.

"Mr. Alfaerus, may I ask if disparaging fellow teachers is a regular practice followed by Americans?"

"Are you offended by my comment about your sweater?" Geoffrey idly asked.

"My style is my choice, Mr. Alfaerus, and is not a subject of discussion."

"Clothing falls into the improvisation category of Defence, Dolores, when it stands out as an excellent target even in bad light. It is simple truth that that colour of pink attracts attention in spades, and nothing you say will change that. I shall refrain from using you as a discussion point in further classes, but I can't exactly use myself as a subject when I'm stuck wearing the most basic teacher black. While the robes might attract attention in the muggle circles and America, it seems to be dress code for British wizards if you're not interested in having them be loud eyesores of colour, as Dumbledore tends to display."

"Thank you, Mr. Alfaerus." She finished with a little mocking giggle; she didn't believe him sincere at all. It was more intelligence than Harry had expected. "Now then, are you going to make it a habit to forget to call roll?"

"Certainly not, you distracted me when I would have done so immediately. It's not my fault you insisted upon discussing my classes with me in the time between them, and then tailing me to the staff room for coffee and back again. The interrogation made me forget, and I needed to take care of the class as I was already late, due to your interference."

Umbridge sniffled again, and then went back to her seat. Geoffrey scanned the class and then gave the four in the front seats a wry smile before continuing on. Harry smiled quietly and flipped through the book to find where he'd stopped once his free period was over, somewhere around the eighth chapter ...

Before long, it was the last dregs of class, and Geoffrey stood and smiled. "Alright, looks like you're done. If you'll all look up here ..." He chuckled quietly at the immediate attention he received. "All right then. Anybody willing to allow me to demonstrate on them? Or to possibly attempt to duel me? I'll go easy on you ..." He wheedled. Harry snickered, and jumped slightly when Hermione elbowed him and nudged him towards the front. Harry gaped for a moment.

"No takers?" Geoffrey queried.

Hermione elbowed him again, but Harry firmly shook his head. As he did so, Umbridge coughed once more. Geoffrey, looking over the class again, finally turned and smiled gently at her. "You have a comment, Madam Umbridge?"

"Do you really think a mock duel is safe, Professor Alfaerus?" She simpered. "The students-"

"Know nothing I can't defend against, and I am perfectly capable of moderating my arsenal to one acceptable against a student of potentially deficit British fifth year knowledge. Feel free to jump me if harm comes to any student, but if they can handle it, I see no reason to not expose them to it. I am not making them accept, and you are perfectly willing to attend to them if they find any reason to complain about me. I certainly cannot stop them from contacting you, and have no desire to do so. But if they wish to subject themselves to it, it's their choice. You cannot protect them from their own decisions." He turned back to the class, and then gave Neville's raised hand a wide smile. "Neville?"

It was a question of name, and of intent. Neville stood, and spoke quietly. "I'll see about duelling you."

Geoffrey smiled warmly. "Good. Thank you, and you can call it off at any time."

Neville nodded, and then offered, "And I don't believe I have a deficit education."

Geoffrey's smile became predatory. "Can you prove it? I may give extra credit if you impress me."

Neville gave a small smile back, and walked to the opposite side of the dais than Geoffrey. Geoffrey almost negligently cast a spell to enclose the duelling area from letting out stray spells and letting in any interference. Harry felt that was a purposeful gesture to infuriate Ms. Umbridge who had been swelling in toady fury.

"A duel is no longer an acceptable way to solve disputes, but it's still a good exhibition of skill." Geoffrey began. "It's a good way to demonstrate spells, show off skill, and, if you're so inclined, enjoy some banter with a friend. Now then, kindly bow," He did so, and Neville copied him easily, falling back into a prepared stance. Geoffrey prepared his stance, but continued talking. "Some duels give a limit on the spells to be used. Clearly, we won't be using anything dark here but I see no reason to limit anything outright; I will be tempering my own as I have several years of experience and am trained equivalent to your aurors, but I would like to see just what Neville here is capable of." He gave a confident smile. "I'm sure I can counter anything he could throw. And you are all free to act like a group of spectators as well."

Harry smiled, and then shouted, "Go Neville!" Most of the class dissolved into laughter, including after Neville shook his head at the gesture. Geoffrey smiled, settled into waiting, and quietly spoke,

"Begin."

Neville waited several moments to see if Geoffrey would throw anything, and then determined to cast the first spell. Neville had perfected soundless spell casting the year before; Alan had been frustrated as Hell when Neville would do something and he couldn't hear it. Harry wasn't as annoyed. He had never bothered competing

with Neville; their strengths were not debated. Harry was stronger magically, Neville flattened him in knowledge; it was a given. Thus, Neville's first spell was silent, and grey-orange. Geoffrey blocked it with protego, but gave Neville a small nod.

"Silent spell casting is introduced sixth year." He commented, waiting still for Neville to act. "Useful in hiding what is being cast, and confusing one's enemies who would thus try to determine by spell colour alone, a chancy option." He shut up as he tried to block another grey spell, and had to dodge as it went through his basic protego shield. He did so quite well, but gave Neville another small nod, and cast his first spell back, silently, but Harry was fairly sure it was the Reductor curse.

Neville dodged without a shield, and then incanted, "Dulce Moxibor!" Harry immediately wondered where on earth he'd learned it, and then stared when he saw starbursts explode everywhere in the shield, rebounding off the walls. Harry watched it all bounce off a shield Neville had gotten up silently, and also bouncing off a shield Geoffrey had quickly raised. There was a small amount of smoke coming off his left sleeve, which he'd raised as the first began before he'd gotten the shield up. The many lights left the further movements hard to determine, but Neville suddenly yelped, and the starbursts ended before Geoffrey quickly moved, and then Neville's wand flew to his hands. There was a moment of silence, and then the class began to clap. Harry clapped enthusiastically even as he let Neville know with his expression that he was most certainly going to be questioning him as soon as they got down from there. Geoffrey waved Neville to bow with him to each other, and then to the room before he finally spoke up.

"That was excellent, and a wonderful demonstration of several points. I think I'll give you all a minor homework to write your impressions of the duel, Neville included, and what spells you think might have been used, and what benefits each effect had. There are no wrong answers to this; I just want an effort from all of you, with no set length. It's due next class. Neville, you're unharmed?" Neville nodded shortly, and Geoffrey quickly nodded. "You have the rest of class to work on the beginning of it, and then you may leave with the bell. Feel free to

adjust seating at will. Move any desks back to order before leaving, or face my wrath."

He went to sit down, and Harry turned his attention to interrogating Neville.

A/N: Ahh, late. Sorry. And the school year begins. Thank you to everyone who reviews!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-One

"Is it that unsurprising it was the twins who taught me?"

"Yes." Harry reassured Neville, staring absently at the canopy over his bed in their dorm. "They come up with the weirdest things. Why'd you use it in front of Umbridge?"

Neville just shrugged, lying back in his bed. "Because I could? It's not that dangerous. It's only a bunch of sparks, and it's a part of the spell that they can't set anything a-light. They're using it for their magical fireworks line."

"Magical fireworks ... they really are trying to outdo Zonko's, aren't they?"

"Yeah. They don't talk about it much with anyone else."

"They seem to do so with you." Harry fished.

Neville snorted. "I listen. They think I don't when I'm playing chess with Connor or Ron, but I do and I have good ears."

"Is that why you always lose to Ron?" Harry asked, feeling his eyes begin to slip shut. Neville's quiet laugh suggested he felt about the same.

"No." He yawned. "Ron's just that damn good. I've stopped trying half the time because it makes such a good chance to eavesdrop and I don't really lose any more than I would otherwise."

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The next morning was as grey and wet as the previous one. Classes to come were Charms and Transfiguration. Neither was all that exciting. Umbridge had apparently chosen to investigate one class for each week, starting with Defence. It came as no surprise to anyone. It did, however, mean that most of the O.W.L. lectures were unmitigated, and both Charms and transfiguration were both quite firm on their insistence that they study thoroughly. The review of the

summoning charm was mildly boring – Harry had accomplished that quite well three years before, and Neville was just as bored – but Vanishing spells proved to be escaping Harry's grasp the entire lesson. He finally managed it at the very end due to Neville's coaching after he'd finished his within twenty minutes. Hermione worked with Ron, and reassured him he'd be able to finish the vanishing next time – he'd managed to get rid of the shell, but the poor snail now resembled half a slug.

Lunch was spent tackling that day's homework. While Harry, Neville and Hermione did not really need to practice vanishing spells, the Charms work was plenty to occupy them in the mean time. Ron did the work as well, but occasionally he would move his finger in mimicry of the vanishing spell motions, mouthing the words, much to Neville's discomfort as he was sitting across from him. Much snickering accompanied the work, interspersed with Hermione snapping at them to focus, and then debating a point with Neville, much to Harry and Ron's benefit.

After lunch, it was Bowtruckles in Care of Magical Creatures. Professor Grubbly-Plank was surprised to see Harry's hand beat Hermione's into the air as he gave the accurate answers about them to her, and then it was the challenge of keeping Ron from trying to go after Draco. Blaise gave a small amount of aid in taking the space between Ron and Draco, and turning a deaf ear to Ron's hissing anger. Harry dragged him back with him to his own space and easily held the bowtruckle while the others drew it, taking his own turn and quietly reminding Hermione on how best to hold it for him. For magical creatures, Hermione listened to Harry's experience.

Care led into Herbology, which was another O.W.L. lecture and essay, and thus Harry led Hermione, Neville and Ron up to the library to work on it after dinner. It was fairly easy for Harry to finish.

Wednesday came about with Arithmancy with Hufflepuff first, and several equations to work on. After class Susan and Hannah tailed them to the courtyard where Ron met them with a brilliant blush. Harry wasn't faring much better.

"Ron!" Hannah gushed. She gave him a brilliant smile, which didn't help the red colour of his face, and ran over to awkwardly shake his hand. She then turned back and coloured upon seeing Susan's raised eyebrow. She immediately dropped Ron's hand, stepped away from him a bit and turned back to talking to Harry. "Ernie is firmly in agreement with you, Harry, in supporting Dumbledore."

The phrase made Harry's insides squirm. He did not support Dumbledore; he didn't trust the man in the least. But in order to support Alan right now, he needed the façade of Dumbledore's stance to keep him on the side he wanted to be. It still didn't sit right with him to try and deny his father and let everyone know that it was Alan who held his allegiance. The thought convinced him he was not going to be eating lunch today; he was not feeling well at all. He merely nodded to Hannah's insistence and smiled. "That's excellent Hannah. Thank him for me."

Susan spoke next. "Kevin said that he caught Theodore on the way out, and expressed that he believed what Alan and Dumbledore were saying. He was a little scared, though, as when he stopped Theodore, a whole bunch of the Slytherins stopped and stared at him as well. He said Theodore seemed to appreciate his saying that, though, and thanked him before excusing himself."

"It was probably defensive of them." Harry shrugged, knowing full well it was. Alan had called them mother hens, once, in irritation. It sounded like an old complaint. "The houses have never exactly been supportive of Slytherin."

"They haven't." Susan allowed. "It's ... really rather silly, you know?"

"Isn't it just?" Harry offered quietly. It made something tighten to hear her say something he'd wished for years he had the courage to say. Susan smiled back for a long moment, and Harry almost wondered where the cotton that filled his head had come from before someone loudly cleared their throat behind him. He blinked, and then jumped when the bell rang. Susan was a brilliant red, and Harry swallowed and shrugged before he left quickly in the direction of Transfiguration. He didn't even look before he threw a rude gesture over his shoulder

at Neville. He ignored Hermione's angry hiss, and the soft laughter Neville allowed.

Transfiguration went fine, but lunch was filled with another trip to finish off homework in the library. Harry got to hear a bit more of Neville's creative cursing as even he slogged through all the work they were given with a bit of difficulty. It wasn't often Neville struggled on homework. Once more, however, Neville and Hermione's discussions were a blessing to Harry and Ron as they listened raptly, and gleaned what was needed from them.

After lunch was Herbology, with finished homework being exchanged for more homework in turn, followed by Care of Magical Creatures and supper. At the end of the day they had more homework than Harry ever wanted to see piled up ever again. He wasn't sure he wanted to add Quidditch practice to it, but, sighing, saw no way out of it. There wasn't a chance in Hell he'd give up Quidditch. He supposed it just meant that getting together with Alan was going to be a challenge and a half.

He perked up when Neville came back from prefect duties with a small note that Blaise had given him. Alan asked about whether he'd be able to find his way to the Chamber Sunday afternoon. Harry thought about his work and schedule, and then nodded slowly to himself, and to Neville as well who was watching for his reaction. Neville easily subsided into the piled homework with Harry once that was cleared.

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Sunday couldn't come soon enough. Friday was the token Keeper tryouts. Only one other did as well as Ron, and she was more interested in Charms Club than Quidditch, so Ron quite proudly took to the spot and to practice. Some of Draco's group tried to occupy the stands and throw taunts, but hadn't counted on being ousted by a doubled up group of prefects from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff not far into it. Since they'd been threatened by 'off-target' quaffles several times, it didn't take much convincing. Hannah and Ernie had been only too happy to help. Ron's enthusiastic wave to them made him miss the quaffle.

Sunday afternoon had Harry and Neville finishing their required homework hours before, and moving straight to the Chamber after lunch. They arrived before Blaise and Alan, and Harry pulled out the book in question and sat Neville down immediately.

“What is it with this incantation?”

Neville sighed, and huffed. “You’re supposed to finish the meditation first, you know.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t learn theory. What’s with it?”

Neville shook his head and leaned over to explain. “It’s a basically aimless self-transfiguration in and of itself. Saying it without the meditation would be ugly. Once you’ve meditated, you say it and it draws upon the concept you’ll have built with the trance to complete the change. You need to stay in form for at least an hour to let it settle, and then you can change back and forth at will as it will have settled into your mind as a basically silent, wandless spell that merely needs a direct thought to trigger it.”

“So I can memorize it without having completed the trance, I just shouldn’t say it without having done so?”

Neville rolled his eyes. “If you want to put it that way, yes, technically you can. But really, I’d rather you didn’t so you don’t make a mistake or something. It’s a wandless spell, so even speaking it out loud could trigger if you’re focused enough on it, hence why they tell you to not memorize it without the trance having been completed. Hell, you could activate it just by thinking too damn hard.”

Harry rolled his eyes and let Neville pull the book away with a sour expression. He watched him mouth the words as he looked it over; Neville was at that stage of the transformation. Harry hadn’t found the time for the trance yet. Alan had reportedly finished his transformation entirely, but hadn’t shown them it yet. Blaise was apparently at the same stage as Neville, and wanting the book, which was why they were meeting. Harry felt a faint twinge that Daphne wasn’t coming, but it scattered when he had a quiet thought of Susan’s long plait.

Harry paused and wondered what kind of airhead he was turning into that he was thinking of girls like that.

Alan's arrival saved him from further headaches as he smiled at him. Blaise frowned back, which made him laugh, but Alan just shook his head quietly and took his usual seat, at the head of the table, Harry to his right, with Neville to his right, and Blaise to his left, and apparently grouchy about it. When placed with only the Slytherins, Blaise took Alan's right. He did not like the insinuation that Harry was more trusted than him. Harry's small smile whenever he glared at him didn't help matters any. Alan finally sighed.

"Enough, both of you. I'm tired of that; it's old."

Harry laughed, and Blaise affected a hurt look for only a moment before apparently remembering that Harry and Neville were there and abandoning it. Neville gave him a small, meaningless polite smile before sliding the book over and nodding to Alan before walking away from the table a distance. Alan stood and leaned against the table to watch with the others. Neville merely closed his eyes, and mouthed silent words for several long moments. Harry saw watched, stunned, as Neville melted into colour, blurred, and then solidified in moments, settling into a fine dun stallion, with the particular specifics of an Arabian. Neville tossed his head and whickered happily, stomping his feet.

"That ... was ... wicked." Harry offered.

Alan was watching with a small smile, and then Neville tossed his head and suddenly bolted towards the door, skidding to a stop just before it and turning and running the length of the room, hooves pounding sharply against the stone. It was magnificent to see, and behind Harry he heard a soft, "Oh, Merlin."

Harry doubted Blaise would ever normally say that about Neville, and made a point to remember it for future blackmail.

Neville finished the length and pranced back proudly before walked straight over to Alan and nudging his shoulder. Alan laughed, “What, are you looking for, a carrot?”

“No,” Harry offered, “he’s probably looking for the same thing I am. What on earth does your Animagus look like? How’d you find the time and incantation anyways?”

“Simple.” Alan brushed it off. “I asked my dad. Didn’t tell him where I’d found it first, but I told him I was finishing it off and he assumed I got it from Geoffrey and found me a book to finish it off with. Different book, but the same method.” Neville head butted him again and Alan rolled his eyes. “Fine, alright already.”

Neville stepped backwards and whinnied again in victory as Alan frowned playfully and then melted into a small dark cat, with large ears, a tufted tail, and spots. Harry couldn’t help but laugh quietly, but that turned into a shriek as Alan jumped on him and clawed his way up Harry’s robe to end up on his shoulder. Harry cursed and laughed.

“Alan, you’re such a pain in the neck.”

Alan took the comment as an opening and gently extended his claws to prick Harry’s neck. Harry quickly back-pedalled.

“No need to prove it, damn it all! Hey, Neville, since you’re stuck like that for an hour, can I catch a ride?”

Neville tossed his head and minced in place for a moment before he nodded. Harry grinned and stroked Alan before he then tackled the problem of how he was supposed to mount a horse bareback. He’d never done much horseback riding. In fact, it had probably amounted to only two or three times in his life. Fortunately he remembered something of it, and managed to guess his way into holding on as Neville simply walked around the room, trotting and nearly knocking Harry off several times. Blaise watched with a shake of his head, buried in his reading.

By the end of the hour, Alan had kicked Harry off partway through and tried riding on his own. He was quite a bit better, owing to having

pestered an uncle into actual lessons, but Neville actually managed to knock him off partway along. He seemed to find it an amusing game. Alan was fine, but treated them to some very creative cursing. He'd managed to hold on enough to slide off rather than fall off, but the result was the same. Neville was inordinately pleased with himself.

Alan came back to the table and groused, "We need to get that brat some tack so we can ride properly."

A snort came from behind him, and then he paled and skipped aside as Neville sent a kick past his side. Harry gave a shaky laugh.

"I don't think he likes the idea. Although it is practical."

Blaise snorted across the table. "Alan, if you even consider that with me, I will not speak to you."

Harry perked. "I never heard what your Animagus was."

Blaise ducked his head back to looking at the book, scratching his cheek gently. It was clearly evasive. Alan cleared his throat, and Blaise finally spoke up, "I'm a Shetland pony."

Harry smiled and nodded. "No wonder you're so antsy about Neville. You're both arrogant pureblooded horse breeds. That's a recipe for disaster."

"You mean them both being pureblood isn't recipe enough?" Alan drawled. Harry snorted, and then they heard Neville trot over once more and very suddenly blurred back into being himself beside the table. He yawned and stretched. Harry felt once again annoyed – Neville had continued to grow, and was now seven cms taller than him. This was, of course, ignoring the fact that Alan was now of a height with Neville as well and not done growing, and that Blaise was currently the tallest of them as well. Being the shortest of his male friends did not please Harry, but he stuck with it and just sighed.

"I suppose it would be, wouldn't it?"

"Of course that isn't the reason for our argument." Neville laughed. "We're just both smart, skilled, good-looking young men and both of us think we're the best and just have to prove it."

Harry put his head into his hands. "I've never bothered competing with you Neville. Your head's big enough."

"Of course it is." Alan agreed. Neville just laughed quietly and then watched as Blaise stepped back from the table and spoke the incantation. His form blurred and a small black Shetland pony stood where he previously had. Neville smiled.

"Well done, Blaise!" He clapped shortly, and then grinned. "But I can still outrun you."

Blaise shook his head and trotted primly off to circle the room, ignoring Neville's comment. Alan watched him go with a warm smile, and turned back to Harry. "You complained you haven't done your trance yet?" Harry shook his head quietly. "You think it'll take a while?"

"Yeah." Harry sighed. "I should probably find a Saturday for it, and then just transform Sunday. It doesn't say you can't do it immediately thereafter." Harry flipped through the book idly. "So it should work fine. I can learn the incantation easy, I've already gone over it."

"Harry, the incantation without the trance is dangerous." Alan cautioned.

Harry slammed the book shut. "I know! Alright? Neville already lectured me on it. I just want this finished, even if I'm some freak of nature without being natural."

Alan blinked quietly, and sat down beside him with a wry smile. "Hey, the Animagus isn't unnatural no matter what it ends up being. You said Sirius was non-standard –"

"I don't want to be anything like my father or his damn friends." Harry growled.

Alan bit his lip. Harry could see it, knew he was being unreasonable, didn't know why, and didn't give a damn. On his other side, Neville was sitting with a frown between his eyes, a cautious look on his face. He didn't expect Blaise to bite his elbow, and yelped as it connected.

"Dammit Blaise! Let me go!" Harry growled. He didn't fight, though, as Blaise had a firm grip on his elbow with his surprisingly sharp horse teeth. Blaise let go and then tossed his head, standing sideways to the table. Harry didn't catch it, but Neville clued him in with a sardonic comment.

"Trying to get him to ride you? I never thought you'd play beast of burden."

Blaise kicked Neville's chair hard enough to knock it back a pace. Neville shut up. Harry turned firmly away.

"I don't want to ride, Blaise." He tried to slump onto the table, but stopped with a scream as Blaise bit him hard. Harry turned on the Slytherin with a foul burst of vocabulary, and was met once again with an implacable eye and an invitation to ride. Harry growled, "Are you not going to leave me alone until I do get on?"

Blaise firmly nodded. It was so funny Harry felt his lips curl unwillingly. "Fine." Blaise was insisting on being ridden. He'd thought Blaise wouldn't let anyone even try. Talk about a day of firsts for the pureblood.

It was easier to mount Blaise's back than Neville's, as Blaise was a much shorter horse. It felt different as well, mostly in the difference of build between the smaller, harder Shetland and the taller, leaner Arabian. He wondered passingly how he might have horse hair stuck to his pants and his chances of explaining it away, but then Blaise set off for the far wall at a firm trot and Harry focused more on trying to figure out how to ride comfortably while bareback – the pace was completely different from Neville's. Partway along, he noticed his arm was still stinging where Blaise had bitten him, and took the chance to examine it. He found to his surprise that the bite had drawn blood.

"Thanks Blaise." Harry drawled. "I always wanted to explain how I managed to get bitten by a horse while at Hogwarts."

Blaise made a soft wicker and rolled his back before moving into a quick gallop back to the others, Harry holding determinedly onto his back. Blaise slowed as he approached, and then, once alongside, made an awkward jump that dislodged Harry from his back and dropped him onto his backside. Harry swore, and Blaise took off running. Alan laughed quietly over Harry's irritation, and then looked at him cautiously.

"Feel better?"

"If you mean, did riding Blaise take my mind off being a self-pitying jackass, then yes."

Alan paused and then nodded firmly. "Good to hear."

Harry gave him a rude gesture in return.

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At the end of Blaise's hour, they were all mostly talked out and pleased with everything. Harry had agreed to slot his transformation for the next week, using that weekend for the trance and the incantation, if he were ready for it. Alan still wanted to acquire two sets of tack, and had warned both associates. Blaise and Alan were still arguing when they headed up the stairs of the tunnel and out. Neville and Harry waited several minutes, and then left themselves, Harry arguing the benefits to Neville. Finally, he acquiesced.

"Fine, you can get it for me if, and only if, you talk our parents into getting us both horseback riding lessons."

"Why do you need the lessons, Neville?" Harry wondered, confused.
"You're the horse!"

Neville snorted. "I need to know what each signal means, so since I can't bloody talk we can still figure out what's going on. And having it

silent would be very beneficial, especially with how dark I am. Good for hiding.”

Harry turned back to the sink and closed it, turning to give Neville a wry grin. “Always glad to hear the Slytherin at work.”

“I echo the sentiment.” Neville shot. His gaze was calculating, but Harry merely smiled and winked at him, unoffended. He liked being called a Slytherin now, and quickly he pulled the door open and bowed Neville out. He followed, and walked into him where Neville had halted. A glance up, although it was actually shorter than him, stopped his breath. Umbridge was standing with a triumphant expression on her face, holding firmly to the arms of a furious Alan and Blaise. She let go and clasped her hands before her.

“I wonder what two upstanding young men, and a prefect at that, were doing wandering a girl’s bathroom, hm?”

Harry paused, and then shrugged awkwardly, walking to stand beside Neville rather than behind him. “I’m sorry Madam Umbridge, but no girls use it anyways and ever since second year, Myrtle has been stalking me if I don’t visit her every once in a while. I felt it better to attend to her rather than have her showing up at inopportune times. Neville just tagged along.”

“Boys still should not be in the girl’s bathrooms. I think three nights detention would remind you. You can serve it at the same time as these two.” She indicated Alan and Blaise with a glittering hand. “You seem to be all in the same boat.” She gave them a questioning look, and then smiled thinly. “You haven’t been getting into things you shouldn’t, have you Mr. Potter? You were the one who opened the Chamber before, were you not?”

“That was Voldemort, actually, that year.” Harry said the name with relish at her squeak. “I just got Ginny out.”

He knew it was a mistake even as he’d opened his mouth, but he squashed his anger at himself immediately thereafter and just resolved to take the punishment he knew would be coming. He would not debase himself and lie to suit her self-delusion.

She almost seemed to swell with indignation. “And do you boys also believe that? Mr. Longbottom?” She fixed Neville with a beady eye, and found him looking almost bored.

“Well, Ginny wasn’t anywhere else, someone had supposedly been taken down there, the chamber opened at parseltongue and the claims were that of the Heir of Slytherin. I know Harry isn’t so deluded as to do anything quite that stupid, so what else should I believe? It was Voldemort.” His voice trembled on the last note, but he spoke it determinedly.

Harry felt inordinately proud of Neville right then. He rarely used Voldemort’s actual name, well, self-proclaimed title, without mocking it.

Umbridge seemed at a temporary loss before she finally straightened and announced. “You will each be in detention with me every night this week. All of you, together. Five o’clock sharp. I will accept no excuses.” She turned and left back to the entrance hall, looking nervously over her shoulder as she did so. She turned hurriedly back and continued along, leaving them alone in the corridor, glaring at the end of the hall. Harry sighed, and blandly spoke up,

“What did she get you for?”

“Rudely running into her.” Alan returned in the same bland tone. “And then she told me I could always come speak to her, and where had I been that I hadn’t, don’t I want justice for my injuries? I broke and told her that she wouldn’t do anything about Voldemort anyways, as she was thoroughly deluded and she gave me detention. Blaise argued; she gave him detention for back talk and then you two walked out of the bathroom. Nice argument.” He gave a short nod, and then swiftly both Blaise and Alan turned and walked back down to the dungeons. Harry looked at Neville and went to climb to the common room. They both sighed.

“Neville?” Harry asked. Neville gave him a querying noise but kept walking. “Are you sorry about me getting us both in detention?”

"No." Neville answered. He sounded completely sure of himself. "She needed someone to look her in the face and tell her to fuck off. Better us than someone else. We're in this war, no matter what. And with her against us, it makes her someone to be brought down. Ron would agree with me."

Harry smiled weakly and chuckled. "I suppose so. What do you think she'll have us do?"

"Whatever it is, she's got to have some kind of twist to make things horrible or something. She almost seemed pleased to get us in for something"

Harry grimaced. "Wonderful."

"Yeah ..."

Harry let it go and opened the door to the common room. He felt there was something that did not bode well for the next week ...

Coming into the common room, however, they were met with a grim-faced Ron who immediately took them up to their dorm. Hermione was waiting on Neville's bed with a furious expression. In her hands was a letter. Ron answered their curious looks, as Neville sat beside Hermione, his hand on her knee as he looked over the paper.

"It's a letter from Percy. That horrible git doesn't believe Dumbledore. Says that Dumbledore must have Alan lying about what happened. He's been like that ever since Fudge picked him up from under Templar; especially since Templar became a member of the Order."

"Does he think Dumbledore would have anyone torture someone else?" Harry growled.

Ron's face darkened. "No, he thinks Alan is lying about being injured. He –he wasn't there, at the third task. He didn't see Alan covered in blood, and he won't believe any of us when we tell him about that."

Harry's eyes darkened as he thought about when he'd watched Koreol carry Alan up to the castle, Alan's chest covered in blood. He

honestly thought that was a memory only matched by when Alan had been dying of basilisk poison. Percy didn't believe in that. Harry hoped for a moment that he would not run into Percy anytime soon; he'd curse the damn bigot. Neville spat a curse, looking up from the letter.

"Ron, your brother is a—" Hermione made a token protest noise at the choice of phrases, but didn't try to stop him speaking, or argue otherwise. That said more about the content of the letter than Neville's reaction. "How can he write that? That, drivel, shit, horse pucky? What kind of idiot does it take to not see what is in front of his nose?"

"Perhaps the kind inclined to marry Umbridge?" Harry dryly commented.

"Oh, don't say that Harry!" Neville cried. "I'll be likely to curse her as soon as I see her tomorrow, and that won't do me any good in getting those damn detentions finished."

"Neville Longbottom!" Hermione shrieked. Harry was amused to see him immediately duck and raise his hands to try and placate her. "What were you doing that you got a detention? You're a prefect!"

"Harry was visiting Myrtle and Umbridge caught us coming out of her loo, alright? And then she insinuated that Harry had opened the Chamber second year, got pissed when Harry told her it was Voldeshins and then didn't like it when I backed him up. So, yeah, we've got detention all next week for 'lying'."

Hermione swelled in fury. Harry could almost see her hair begin to stick up and frizz. He almost felt in awe of her, and easily understood why she and Neville seemed to fit together so well. While she was harder to antagonize than Neville, she could get just as angry as he could when her sense of right and wrong was violated. Harry suspected Umbridge had just done that unforgivable sin. It was a very amusing sight; he was hard pressed to keep a smile off his face, which probably would have prompted her to light into him as well.

"That horrible woman!" Hermione shrieked. "How could she call that a lie? If she says Harry opened it, then Harry petrified his best friends and threatened the life of practically his little sister! Harry isn't evil or mean or cruel, and if she can say that, I hope she rots in Hell! That's despicable, she should be thrown out on her ear! I can't stand people like that! It's evil!"

Neville quickly placed his hand over her mouth for a moment and whispered something in her ear. She immediately calmed down, but her mouth was as thin a line as McGonagall's went when she was offended. Harry had to fight back the urge to laugh. Now that she was calm, Harry sat down on his bed and sighed. "Is anyone willing to help me double-check my Transfiguration essay? I don't want to have McGonagall munch on me."

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The next day was better than had been expected. History of Magic was as much of a bust as they had thought, but it was blessedly Umbridge free. Harry wasn't looking forward to Potions, but he hadn't thought it would be anything troublesome. Unexpectedly, it was worse.

Walking in, Harry felt his mouth twist as he found Alan and his not taking their normal front seats but instead sitting at the far back. A look to the front proved why: Umbridge was talking quietly with a thin-lipped Snape at his desk. Harry pulled the others with him to spots just adjacent to where Alan and his were. Umbridge looked up at them and gave a sickly sweet smile. Harry glowered back and wished the class would move along.

Snape started with a fixed scowl on his face. Most of the rest of the class was already off balance due to the abrupt change in seating of those around them, and quite a few of them were not in favour of Madam Umbridge, much less her effect on the already snarky Potions master. Snape, for once, agreed with his students, but only someone who was looking for it would see it. Harry was looking.

Their papers were returned abruptly, and Harry was mildly shocked to see an E scratched onto the top corner hard enough to tear the paper.

Most notably, he'd apparently had marks taken off mainly for the incorrect answer of putting his last name down as 'Potter'. Harry would have been offended had he not understood the very amusing sentiment. He wondered what Snape would do if he signed the next one 'Evans'. Would that get him an O?

"I have awarded you the grade you would receive were you to turn this paper in for your O.W.L. examinations. This should give you a realistic idea of what to expect from your examinations."

If that was the case, Harry felt the O.W.L.s might be marginally easier than they were painted. Marginally, as that essay had been hideous. Neville looked, predictably, disappointed. The brat liked tests. It was abnormal.

"As a general standard, the work I received was abysmal. Most of you would have failed had this been your examination. I expect a great deal more effort on this week's essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes, or I shall have to start handing out detention to those dunce's who get D's."

Draco smirked for several moments before he glanced to his sides. Harry fought down a snicker; most likely Draco would lose his bookends were that to happen. Lavender, in front of Harry, looked pale. Hermione glanced around Harry to see what grades they'd gotten and looked startled at Harry's E. She tilted her own paper to show an A, and Neville smiled. He'd gotten an E as well. Ron looked a bit pale at Hermione's questioning glance before he tilted over a P. Harry shook his head and pulled out a spare parchment, scratching a quick note of 'I'll give you some help with the next one; I've got a good grounding on it, and books' and sending it across the desk. Ron received it with a look of relief, and then squeaked at the sound of a gentle 'hem hem'

The note disappeared into his bag before he noticed she was still at the front of the room. Harry approved, and turned his attention forward. She said something too quiet for him to hear this far back, and then Snape spoke clearly enough for all of them to hear.

"Madam Umbridge, I believe my teaching normally does not allow for unauthorized interruptions from anyone, so while I am, of course, perfectly willing to answer your questions, I do not approve of you asking them in the middle of a class."

"Would you treat the Headmaster this way, Professor Snape?" Mrs. Umbridge twittered.

"Yes, I would resent an interruption even from him and would dearly hope he'd only do so in the most dire of circumstances." Severus finished, before he turned back to the class and instructed them to prepare a strengthening solution. It was almost easy compared to the last assignment, and Harry quickly finished it, ending up pleased with the turquoise colour that was just a tad too blue to be perfect, unlike the almost mirror images of Neville and Hermione's. He rolled his eyes at Neville's smug grin, and simply handed it in, grateful to get out of the class, and feeling a tad bit sorry for Severus and his misfortune of having to deal with Madam Umbridge for however long she remained in his class.

Lunch came about in a happy mood. Harry reassured Ron of his aid, and then smiled at the others and left with Neville for the library. They would have no time in the evenings if Umbridge were as petty as they suspected she was, and needed badly to get to work on the homework. Ron came to them shortly afterwards with Hermione and all of them worked on Snape's essay, throwing tips to Ron at odd times. He was upset that Harry didn't have the book on hand, but subsided when Harry promised to get it to him the next morning – there was no way in Hell he was letting Ron into his trunk. He didn't even usually let Neville in.

His free period was put to use in finishing all the homework he'd had thus far, and double-checking the essay they'd had for Defence. He was looking forward to having class with Geoffrey once more, hopefully without the encumbrance of Madam Umbridge.

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"Exemplary design for distracting one's opponent and managing small damage as well." Neville repeated with a wide grin. Harry

finally sighed and turned to swat his friend. Neville yelped, cursed, and then glared at Harry's dry smiling return.

"Stop quoting him, please?"

"Just because you were too chicken to try –"

"Doesn't mean you need to keep rubbing the fact that you did and succeeded in our faces, alright?" Harry finished. He wasn't as angry as he sounded, really, but hearing it three times in a row wasn't leaving him tolerant. "If you're that fucking nervous about detention with Umbridge, just give it a rest, or find something else."

Neville shut up. Harry was surprised he'd actually been right. Both of them settled back into their supper, missing the worried exchange Hermione and Ron had over their heads. It was after Defence class. Geoffrey was expansive and funny as a teacher when not tied down by Umbridge, and he'd spent a large portion of class breaking down the otherwise short duel between himself and Neville and describing the particular benefits and disadvantages of the spells used. Neville had spent most of the class in startled silence at the amount of praise he was receiving. Unfortunately, the silence had not lasted outside of the class, and, as Harry had pointed out, nerves had made it mildly worse. For himself, Harry was beginning to brood about the detention. Neither of them was expecting just a run-of-the-mill detention.

"Harry, it's ten to. She's up a floor, so we'll need the time to walk. Don't want to be late." Neville announced.

Harry sighed and nodded. Gathering his things, he stood and walked to meet Neville at the end of the table, looking up in time to see Blaise and Alan walking out the door. They followed them in silence, finding their way to the office that had been set aside for Madam Umbridge. Blaise and Alan were already waiting by the closed door, but they both gave Harry and Neville brilliant smiles as they approached. Harry felt like smacking them. They were being Slytherin – they were going to make the Gryffindors knock. Harry felt a desire to try and outwait them, to see which one of them would step up first to make sure they weren't late. Fortunately, Neville seemed the notice the standoff and stepped forward, knocking quietly.

A sugary, "Come in," floated out, and Neville looked back at the others with a strained expression, opening the door and holding it with a raised eyebrow. Harry paused for a second, before he walked in with a frown, and stepped to one side of the door just inside, feeling nauseous. Neville did the same; in fact, his expression of disgust was identical as well. Harry had never seen this many doilies in his life. He couldn't think of any doilies his own mother used offhand, but this ... this was undoubtedly too damn much.

"Good evening, children."

Harry's attention moved to the overwhelming floral decoration in the middle of the room and realized with a start that it was Ms. Umbridge standing there. She'd blended into the tablecloth behind her as she was wearing a robe in a similarly lurid floral design. None of them vocally responded; instead, as one, they all stiffened in place. Harry knew he definitely did not like being addressed like a child.

She frowned. "When I address you with 'good evening' you are expected to respond back. Now, let's try that again. Good evening, children."

Harry wondered if she'd ever tormented other children with her presence. He really couldn't manage to figure out how to respond to her without digging himself deeper than if he didn't open his mouth at all. An incoherent murmur came from Blaise, but none of the others tried to speak.

Madam Umbridge swelled again; Harry found an irreverent wish that she would explode, but all she did was smile with a painfully sweet expression and announce, "Twenty points from each of you, and you'll have a special detention Saturday. Shall I make it one more, or ... 'Good evening, children.'"

'She's like a dog with a damn bone,' Harry irreverently thought, and then, imagining pleasantly that she was drowning in one of Snape's nastier concoctions, managed a strained, "Good evening, madam." Beside him, Neville managed about the same amount of sincerity.

Alan's sounded genuine, and Harry made a point to ask him how on earth he'd managed it as Blaise sounded formally polite.

"Much better." She smiled sweet enough to rot your brain, and then indicated the four desks around her. "Well then, if you'll just sit down we can get started on your detention. Oh, and no no no." She stopped them when they moved towards the desks, and smiled warmly. "I have special seats in mind for each of you. Mr. Potter, here," She indicated the seat to the right of her desk, "And Mr. Prince, here." It was the seat opposite Harry's, on the other side of her desk. "Mr. Longbottom beside Mr. Prince, and Mr. Zabini, beside Mr. Potter. Thank you."

Blaise sat at the indicated desk quietly. He seemed to be treating this as a pureblood reception, and was exhibiting typical pureblood manners. Harry fought to copy him, but wasn't having as much success as even Neville managed. Alan simply appeared emotionless as he sat down.

Once they were all settled, she set a black, wickedly sharp quill above each of their parchments. Harry eyed his with trepidation. He knew he should know what that quill was, but it was escaping him at the moment with a thread of disbelief. Alan's startled expression wasn't helping matters any.

"You'll each use my quill to write your lines." She ordered. "Three of you will be writing, 'I must not tell lies'. Mr. Zabini, you will write, 'I must not defy authority'."

Neville was the one to challenge her, but he managed to sound politely inquisitive. It was a dangerous sound from him. It meant he suspected something. "How many times?"

"Oh, however long it takes for the message to sink in."

The quill placed itself with a sharp pang of fear. It was a Blood Quill. Its use was controlled. It could be used to sign contracts that required the people be magically bound to hold the terms. While using it for lines wouldn't bind anything, it was effectively torture, and potentially

could do permanent harm. With how she'd phrased that, she was hoping for it.

Harry didn't know what to do. He did not want to do this, but could he fight Umbridge on her own turf? He could just get himself in trouble if he didn't have enough clout to fight her and win, and he didn't want to deal with that. He wanted to stay in the school.

If he wouldn't fight and risk it, then he had to write. Beside him, Blaise was already dutifully scratching out lines, his face impassive as red words etched themselves onto the back of his hand as he kept writing.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up at Madam Umbridge. Behind her, he could see that Neville and Alan were watching him intently. Harry smiled a sugary sweet smile at Madam Umbridge and wished upon her a painful death as he said, "Just wondering why you're intent on torturing me is all, but I answered my own question and will get to work immediately."

He picked up the quill and looked away from her without another word. Even the loss of ten more points didn't faze him. He couldn't write if he couldn't have at least one real reason for the punishment.

I must not tell lies

It was an eerie feeling to cut the words into the back of his hand and to see the ink gleaming black in the light in her office, as the clock ticked loudly and consistently for hours. It was almost absurd to be writing lines in his own blood while numerous fluffy, Technicolor kittens gambolled innocently upon ceramic plates. Harry began to just plan how to get the twins to destroy her office when finally he heard her stand up from her desk again. He'd wished each time she stood that she would announce the torture was over – he didn't want to take notes tomorrow at all – but she hadn't yet. He still, however, hoped ...

"There now. Let's see your hands." She asked. Harry gratefully dropped the quill and held his out towards her with a mutinous

expression he could not control. Even Blaise looked pained. She looked over them, and tuttered quietly.

"Not much of an impression on any of you, I fear. Well," She grinned pleasantly. "I'll still be seeing you tomorrow night, won't I? You may go."

Harry quickly grabbed his things and moved out of the office. Once he was past the door, he didn't pause but simply ran down the hall. Neville hollered something behind him, but he didn't stop, didn't pause, and headed downstairs and out a side passage that was almost unknown. Once out in the night air, he hit the lawn running hard. Behind him, the door slammed, and then suddenly Neville was beside him, in his Animagus form, tossing his head and whickering loudly. Harry simply shook his head and went to the broom shed, rattling the locked doors. He kept his firebolt there for convenience, but had forgotten that the locks used this late at night were stronger than they were in the day. He was surprised when the door sprang open.

"Ah, that's what you need."

Harry jumped, looking back to see Neville standing quietly behind him, human once more, his face open with understanding. Harry nodded without words, and quickly pulled out his broom, mounting it without a second thought and launching into the night air. He needed to forget, to move on. Umbridge was a horrible, evil woman, and he needed past her. The only escape he could imagine right now was to fly.

A/N: And we have Evil Umbridge. Thank you to everyone who reviewed!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-Two

Harry prayed like hell that he would not have to see Madam Umbridge the next day, but luck was not with him. He entered Transfiguration and saw her sitting in the back corner like some diseased toad, and felt rage sweep through him. Neville gripped his arm painfully tightly and steered him into a seat as far from the woman as possible, putting himself and Harry in the far corner where Ron and Hermione usually sat. When Professor McGonagall swept in she eyed them curiously but Harry watched Neville indicate Umbridge with a short glance, and McGonagall didn't mention it, handing out the mice as usual.

It was a delight to see her manage Umbridge with a firmer tongue and hand than even Geoffrey had. Harry wondered what she was doing there for a short time as he listened with half-an-ear to McGonagall's lecture. She'd inspected Geoffrey the entire first week, but now she'd inspected Potions and Transfiguration both in the first two days of the next. Perhaps she felt the other classes needing only a single day of attention. Perhaps ...

Neville brought his attention back to class with a sharp elbow, and then proceeded to vanish his mouse completely on his first try. Once Neville had the hang of a spell, he had it. Harry, concentrating completely upon the work for once in order to ignore Umbridge, surprised himself by doing the same.

The end of class came, and Neville followed Harry out with stern attention, all the way down to lunch, where Harry ate a pittance in silence, and then left for the Quidditch pitch. This time, Neville chose not to follow him, but sent him off with a faint nod. Harry was grateful. He suspected he'd be doing several midnight flights this week. He wondered what kind of trouble they'd get into if they chose to skip detention Saturday. A glance at his hand convinced him otherwise. He didn't want this to get any worse.

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The night passed fortunately quickly. The four of them easily moved to their places, practicing polite masks and writing steadily and

silently the entire time. Once they were released, Harry ran once more out to the pitch and flew for nearly two hours, trying to calm down. He was surprised to land and find both Alan and Blaise waiting patiently with Neville for him. He looked quietly aside as Alan pulled him into a one-armed hug, and didn't give any response, simply pulling away to wander up to Gryffindor Tower as they went back to the dungeons.

Sleep that night was restless. He had insubstantial nightmares, and woke in a cold sweat before his alarm, or, indeed, anyone else. Unwilling to return to his disturbed sleep, Harry gathered his school work and went down to the common room, working stubbornly on his homework. He was pleased to find Fred and George coming down as one of the first, and he called them over immediately. They came with curious looks.

"How would you two like to test your abilities to prank and not get caught?"

The twins looked at Harry with interest, and sat down. "What do you want done, Harry?"

"Umbridge." Harry said simply. He almost winced when he heard the amount of malice that had slipped into the simple word. Both twins had noticed, and gave him a concerned look. Harry sighed, and then offered them his right hand. The back of it was still red and raw. He wondered just how many more lines it would take for it to no longer heal. The twins were outraged.

"What is she doing?"

"It's just lines." Harry drawled bitterly. "With a blood quill. For more than six hours."

The two twins looked between each other meaningfully and then nodded carefully to Harry, moving off into a corner as they plotted and planned. Harry felt a small twinge of pleasure at the thought of the havoc they would cause, and then called them back over. They came with curious looks, which became wicked as Harry described to them the set-up of Madam Umbridge's office. Neville came down

partway through and sighed as he saw Harry. Harry, witnessing out of the corner of his eye waved him over, feeling no shame at the gentle shaking of Neville's head. He'd get Umbridge for this if he had to give up school. He was beyond putting up with it, but since he doubted she'd expell him, caution was still gratingly necessary.

The twins put their heads to making life miserable for Umbridge quickly, but they warned Harry they wanted to have a proper plan set up for it first, so results might take as long as a month. Harry willingly accepted it, and, with the promise of retribution, he kept up with his schoolwork and put up with the detentions with a tad more finesse.

III

It was two hours into the third detention that the cut stopped healing afterwards. Umbridge noticed the pause and looked over at him, and later, Alan and Blaise, all of who reached the same point without a half-hour of each other. Neville had done so several minutes earlier, and she simply smiled and went back to work. The writing continued, the room filling with contained fury, which was no longer simply coming from Harry. She let them go around midnight once more, gathering their blood-stained papers with a brilliant smile and sending them, bleeding, out the door. Harry didn't run this time, walking quietly with the others. Blaise spoke first, in an idle tone.

"I wonder what Pomfrey would do for this?" He was eyeing his bleeding hand with distaste.

Neville's mouth quirked. "She never said we couldn't go see the mediwitch, you know. And Pomfrey takes people at all hours."

Blaise eyed his hand again, and then started for the stairs. "I need to be able to take notes tomorrow. Might as well see if she can't do anything for it."

Harry exchanged a look with Neville. If Blaise went, the report of what the detention was would spread. Harry felt a twinge that he hadn't written home about it yet, and, in Neville's face, he saw that Neville hadn't either. As Alan started after Blaise both of them sighed.

"I'll send a letter tomorrow morning." Harry offered. Neville nodded, and they followed after the others. It wouldn't take a genius to find out that they were all being injured in detention if two of them were, although the argument against Slytherins could be used. However, neither Neville nor Harry was one to use it. Harry managed a wry smile. "How pissed off do you think Madam Pomfrey will be?"

"Utter outrage. She'll probably wake Dumbledore to complain."

Harry laughed quietly, and found them caught up to Blaise and Alan at the door to the hospital wing. Blaise knocked loudly, and waited. It wasn't five minutes before the door opened, and a concerned Pomfrey looked out and quickly ushered them in.

"Come in, children, what's wrong? I haven't gotten a midnight visit in ages, I – what happened to your hand, child? To all of yours?" She gasped. "Good gracious, sit down, all of you, and speak up."

"We just came from detention with Ms. Umbridge." Harry answered. "She's had us using a blood quill for lines."

Madam Pomfrey dropped the phial she was holding and straightened with a furious cry. "How dare she! Using a blood quill in detention, on students? And you only just came here?"

"Honestly, Madam Pomfrey," Neville offered, "what can really be done against her? Against her is against the ministry. We just want to know if you can make it easier to take notes tomorrow. Do all you can, but we do need to sleep tonight. Besides," Neville growled, "she wanted to make sure the message got to us. We've got the rest of the week for detention, still."

"You—" Madam Pomfrey swelled indignantly for a moment, and then picked up the fortunately unbreakable phial and set about silently preparing four bowls, muttering under her breath. She quickly handed them over, her lips in a tight line and her voice tight. "Soak your hands in this. It's pickled murtlap essence and should ease the soreness and prepare the cuts for healing. A blood quill, on students." Madam Pomfrey hissed. "That horrible woman. Anyways, I'll send this with you, to use each evening afterwards. Don't worry; she'll still be

satisfied, for the rest of the evenings if -" she hissed and cut herself off. "I want you back here immediately after your detentions end, and I'll be having some strong words with the headmaster. A blood quill. Never, in all my days. Give it ten minutes." She ordered. "And I want to see each of your hands before I let you go. I'll be back in a moment." She quickly moved back into her office, leaving them alone. Alan eyed the door and then quietly spoke.

"I think we'll have to postpone your finishing off your Animagus. Madam Pomfrey probably won't let us go until Sunday afternoon."

Harry nodded quietly, and eyed the door. "Next week, then?"

"It'll have to be an all-nighter, then, and most of Sunday."

"Call it planning against Umbridge." Neville offered. "Me, Blaise and Alan can come up with something to offer to the twins during your trance."

There was a short line of nods, and then they returned to being impassive as Madam Pomfrey hustled back out, her face still set with outrage, and her lips tightened into a fine line. However, Harry's hand felt several times better and he agreed that it most certainly was worth it to have come.

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The next detentions were much the same. They went, bled, and left to soothe their hands before falling asleep. Unformed nightmares continued to keep Harry from sleeping well, and he started skipping lunch both to finish that week's homework, and because anger upset his stomach, leaving him constantly nauseous, unable to eat comfortably. Umbridge did indeed seem to be inspecting classes by day, now, and Harry angrily thought that she must have been planning on being in one class of his each day of the week. He hoped that she found no grounds upon which to stay at the school the entire year, but held little weight to the dream.

Finally, Saturday came. While Angelina was not pleased with him being absent from the Quidditch practice, she knew both that he was

good enough to survive missing it, and that he had not tried to get into detention. When she'd asked, he'd flatly refused to ask Umbridge to spare him for Quidditch practice. He explained that that would just make the bitch more vindictive and give her an aim to try and destroy. Angelina seemed unable to determine what to be more shocked about: that Harry had sworn like that against a teacher, or that he thought she would do that. After he showed her his hand, which he assured her Pomfrey was going to see to once the detentions were over, Angelina didn't argue again.

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The lines on Saturday were the same as the days before. Apparently they were 'naughty' enough to make her want to leave scars on their hands in the words she was trying to impress upon them with. They worked in silence, seated as she had assigned, not talking or even reacting anymore. Harry's face was as impassive as Blaise's, watching the blood gleam on the paper as each line counted down the time she was going to hold them for.

I must not tell lies

He'd sent the letter home to his parents, reporting on the detention with Umbridge, why he'd gotten it, and what she was having them do. He'd told why Umbridge gave for all four of them, and reassured them he was seeing Madam Pomfrey about it. He'd gotten a letter back the next morning, reassuring him that they understood, and that Lily was contacting Alice and seeing about contacting Mrs. Zabini about her stance on the punishment, to see if a complaint could be lodged. James had included a comment at the bottom that was written unsteadily, a short reassurance that he was sending a letter to Fred and George promising any aid they might require for their campaign. Harry had seen the twins hustle a large package in that morning and up to their dorms. He was looking forward to the prank.

"Children," Ms. Umbridge's voice broke in. Harry looked up, his face completely blank. "Let's see your hands."

All four of them raised their hands in sync. Harry sardonically thought that this was the most time he'd ever spent with his best friend in a week.

Ms. Umbridge walked around with a self-satisfied smirk as she looked at their bleeding hands, touching them and seeming intent on seeing how deep the cuts were. Harry felt it best that he'd gotten a grip on his temper. Calling her on being a sadist would not lessen the detentions.

"I think we can still impress the message a bit more. The detention will finish at seven."

They'd been in there since nine.

I must not tell lies

Harry wondered what her reaction would be if he took the advice to heart and told her exactly what he thought of her. Probably more detention, if not outright suspension or expulsion. Going over the long list of comments he had in mind made writing a little easier.

I must not tell lies

It was six, now. They had a mere hour to go. They hadn't eaten since breakfast. Harry wondered if he could bring Severus in on the plans to make Umbridge's life Hell. He'd certainly be most creative in potions. Talking to Geoffrey would get them some creative stuff too. Hell, all he had to do was ask Alan to join the party, even if it were discretely. Send more stuff to the twins. Harry noted to tell the twins to work out an escape plan if Umbridge rumbled their game. He was desperately looking forward to the pranks.

Across the office, Neville was writing intently with a slightly vacant expression. Alan looked as mild as he had since the beginning. Harry suspected he was playing up the trauma from the year before to Umbridge, making her think him to be less of a threat than he was. Blaise was simply keeping his head down. Harry wondered if he'd even contacted his mother about the punishments to begin with, or if

he'd resent Harry's mother talking to her. He'd ask. Best he was forewarned if he didn't want it, or expected a bad result.

Harry turned back to the writing with a sigh and wondered how many lines he'd accomplished in the many hours they'd been writing. How much blood he'd lost. How long Umbridge had wanted to do this to a bunch of kids. How long she might get in Azkaban if someone could pull a charge on her. Is sadism illegal? How would one prove it? It'd be nigh impossible, wouldn't it? He wondered if using the quills for detention would be considered illegal. He doubted it had come up before.

"Well then."

Harry looked up at the girlish, breathy voice. Did he imagine the tone of regret, or was she really that bloody evil?

"Seven o'clock. Let's see how far we've come." She inspected their hands again, and then smiled gently at all of them. "I think I've gotten my point across. Let's see you all remember it. Have a good evening."

Harry nodded silently, and then walked out the door, not looking back. He never wanted to set foot in her office again. Neville jogged slightly to catch up, and gently looked over the blood streaming across the back of his hand with a grimace.

"I really hope Madam Pomfrey can heal this. I don't want to try and take notes with this much damage. I swear, any more of that writing, and it'll start doing permanent damage beyond a scar."

"We're going to have to avoid detention with her then, aren't we?" Harry growled. "Stupid bitch." He glanced back to see that Blaise and Alan were walking behind them, talking quietly and watching the two Gryffindors ahead of them. "I'm just glad it's done with. I will never speak in her presence again."

"Then she'll have you writing Zabini's lines, Harry." Neville drawled. "The prefects are in a bit of an uproar. The marks aren't easy to hide, and so they're all wondering what she's playing at that she's giving

such harsh detentions to prefects for such minor infractions.” Neville grinned. “No one thinks I was telling a lie in my answer. Yours is pretty given that it wasn’t a lie either. Alan doesn’t quite have full support – Ravenclaw is itching at the lack of really solid evidence, but Geoffrey is winning them over pretty quickly. But most of the rest of the prefects stand behind Dumbledore.”

“That’s good to hear.” Harry smiled lightly. “Having the fifth year prefects is a step in the right direction. What about the rest?”

“Gryffindor is behind Dumbledore pretty much whole-heartedly. One of the seventh years isn’t quite sure, but isn’t really arguing either. Hufflepuff is decidedly split at the moment, right about down the middle. The two sixth years, and male seventh year – who’s also Head Boy – aren’t agreeing, but the seventh year female prefect is Dumbledore all the way. Ravenclaw is still neutral, although the seventh year male is quietly for Dumbledore according to rumour. Slytherin, as usual, splits between Alan and Draco. Alan has the sixth year prefects and one seventh year, who’s also Head Girl, but Draco has the majority of the upper house and the male seventh year prefect.”

“Nice.” Harry sighed. “What a lovely divided school. Even from within, we are divided.” Harry shook his head, and pulled open the doors to the hospital wing, waving Neville in and then holding the door for Blaise and Alan. Neither indicated that they noticed, but Harry knew it was as good as their interaction got in the halls during relatively sane hours. It was not deserted as it was at midnight on a school night. People were up and about at seven in the evening on the weekend, and they were not the only people in the hospital wing. Harry walked in and stopped.

What was his father doing there?

“Come in, all of you.” Madam Pomfrey chided. “Sit down over there, and let me see your hands. I’ll explain after I’ve checked you over. Oohh, that horrible woman.”

Harry sat beside Neville with a gentle thump and looked over his father and godfather with curiosity. Having aurors in the school, in full

uniform? A glance confirmed that the light haired aurors standing over by Pomfrey's desk were the Longbottoms, and he didn't know the dark woman who was stiffly watching the proceedings next to his own mother. He sent Lily a small smile and got one in return before she returned to talking with the woman Harry suspected was Blaise's mother. So much for telling him she was going to be informed.

Pondering was postponed as Madam Pomfrey fell upon them with bowls of murtlap essence and several other tinctures and salves. She moved through them from one end to the other, and thus Harry was first to be looked over and tutted at. She simply looked first, and then stood back with a sigh.

"Ten minutes to soak your hands again, and in the meantime please answer the aurors. Horrible woman." Madam Pomfrey spat, the last probably not intended for the children's ears, but since she hadn't even moderated her voice it was heard anyways.

Sirius pulled up a chair about midway between all four of them and sat back, a muggle pen and paper in hand with a cocky grin. James glared down at him, but then looked across them all once more.

"Madam Pomfrey told us that Ms. Umbridge was using a blood quill on you as detention. Can you describe the quill?"

"Black, sharp, and stiff." Harry said. "It was rather obvious when we didn't need ink and the writing was etched into the back of my hand and the ink on the paper was red."

Neville nodded, and Alan just remained quiet, watching them carefully.

"I'd recognized it from seeing my mother use one on several reports after her widowment." Blaise admitted carefully.

James nodded. "Did any of you complain to her about the use of the quill?"

"Would it have done any good?" Blaise asked idly. "I couldn't see any way to make her back down if she's got the minister's backing. I didn't want to give her more reason to extend the detentions further."

James looked to each of the others, and Harry nodded his agreement with Blaise. James looked mildly pained, but nodded to Harry. Fortunately he turned away before Harry's expression darkened to a pained grimace. Apparently he didn't like the word of a Slytherin. He wondered what his mother was wrapping around his throat to get him to be here and ask the questions without discounting it for the Slytherins. It was probably only due to Harry and Neville's involvement. The Slytherins were merely more weight on the sinking barge.

"Why did you eventually choose to come to Madam Pomfrey?"

"I wanted to be able to take notes the next day. My hand was bleeding freely. All of ours were." Blaise answered again. Harry wondered why it had defaulted to him. Harry knew he was both too angry and too tetchy about his father right then to speak up, and Alan was holding to a meek act – or Harry hoped it was an act – for most public associations, but why Neville wasn't speaking escaped him. Perhaps avoiding the potential for favouritism? James was Neville's godfather.

"Let's see your hands. Poppy, is that okay for us to take a look?"

Madam Pomfrey trotted over and nodded. "Yes, perfectly fine."

Alice strolled over to help look, eyeing the cuts with irritation and disgust. She tapped Neville's head with a frown – a scold, Harry supposed, for not telling her sooner – and finally turned back to James.

"Yep, blood quill alright. I think we can get her to stop it with a media threat, don't you? Mrs. Zabini?"

Blaise's mother strolled over and nodded. "Of course. You have someone in mind for the article?"

"Lucille and Ginger Alfaerus should be able to draft one we can throw at her. We don't have the time to get her kicked out right now, but if that can control her crueler tendencies, it will have to do, at least until

James, Frank and Sirius can lean on Fudge more. He's being stubborn, with the public in such an uproar, but having his undersecretary get creamed will get him sitting up and doing something. We just can't control what, yet."

Harry smiled faintly and turned back to eyeing his hand. The adults were taking care of it. Thank Merlin. He never wanted to have to use one of those things again.

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Alan got the more accurate report of how Umbridge reacted to the media threat about the blood quill detentions. Geoffrey was crowing about it, laughing his head off as he regaled Severus with the tale of Ginger smiling warmly as she most politely threatened Umbridge with an already prepared article about the Ministry's abuse of power. With the backing of Lucille, Geoffrey's oldest sibling, Umbridge had caved on the blood quill and agreed to not use it again in detention or anything else questionable.

That small pleasure did not, however, ease any previous worries.

He was pinned, helpless, to the ground as burning pain flowed across his chest like scalding hot water. The darkness pressing against his eyes was his only protection from the burning flames he knew was just past the thin protection he'd raised, waiting eagerly for a chance to crush him beneath its weight. He struggled, thrashing against invisible bonds, his muscles burning with strain. He couldn't move! He couldn't fight back! The strain was killing him, slowly, eating him from the inside out –

Alan sat up in bed with a strangled gasp, and then clutched his pounding head. He breathed carefully, slowly, and with a strangled groan, tossed aside his sweat-soaked sheets and exited the silencing charms he'd erected around his bed. He padded across the thick carpet and into the bathroom connected to the dorm he shared with Theodore and Blaise, to clean up. He'd woken covered in fear-sweat almost every night since summer. He was surprised he didn't have bags beneath his eyes, but apparently the nightmares weren't disrupting that much of his sleep. It didn't affect the headaches he

always woke with, though. He couldn't figure out what they could be, but they faded remarkably quickly after waking, so he wasn't too concerned.

Blaise disliked that Alan kept him out of knowing when he had nightmares, but he had stopped arguing after getting hexed for waking him several times over. The nightmares had calmed over the summer. He no longer thrashed and screamed; it was mostly just short, tight snippets of helplessness and phantom pain, easily exorcised with morning.

He'd finished his shower and was cleaning up over the sink when Blaise staggered in.

"You're up early again Alan." He accused.

"You're overprotective again Blaise." Alan returned.

Blaise snorted. "Hardly, Alan. It's called looking out for my interests."

"Slytherins are always the most interesting house." Alan pondered as though Blaise wasn't there. "They are certainly the most successfully self-deluded in thinking that they only look out for themselves and yet mother-hen a chosen attendee to the point of suffocating them."

Blaise had long since ignored it when Alan complained of that. So did everyone else. Alan had given up on getting them to stop. He'd tried to ask his father if any group had ever acted like that in his year, and he hadn't answered. Alan presumed it must be a yes, but that his father wasn't proud of who the attendee had been, and possibly that he had been one of those to smother them. He was currently banking on it possibly being Lucius, but wasn't fishing for confirmation. He didn't care that much.

Alan walked out as Theodore was getting out of bed and gave him a short, curt hello before returning to his trunk. Theodore blearily moved into the bathroom, and Alan suppressed a smile as he waited to hear if Theodore would walk in on Blaise in the shower again or not. No yelp came, so Alan presumed it had been avoided once more. Probably with a locking spell.

Alan wondered idly if Theodore perhaps did it on purpose; after living with Andrew, it wasn't a farfetched concept to him, but he shelved it as unimportant and went to brave the common room, his bookbag comfortably situated on his shoulder. As expected, his appearance caused a momentary quiet and then Lucille broke it by stalking over and glaring at him again. Alan gave her a wide-eyed, innocent look and a vacant smile. She didn't fall for it.

"Alan, where's Blaise?"

"Showering. He took too long, so I decided to come keep you company." Alan easily dodged around her to wave at Daphne and Tracey who were seated on a firm-looking couch, chatting comfortably, Salvador sprawled across the armchair nearby. Daphne and Tracey waved brightly back and then returned to their discussion. Salvador gave a short salute, his eyes still closed. Lucille tailed Alan to the chairs like an angry cat, and then sat stiffly on one of the wooden chairs as Alan took part of the couch seated opposite the girls.

"Where's Stephanie at?" Alan asked.

"She's entertaining her friends one level up. You know, the girl's common." Lucille answered. "They all listen to her, even if they don't like agreeing with Dumbles."

Alan nodded slowly. It was a divided house on the threat of Voldemort in many different ways. Some believed and were pleased. Others were scared. Others refused outright to believe either to save themselves, which was the base minority, or to keep in the good graces of the current political climate. Stephanie had done well to make her friends come to believe the threat, not the promise. Quite a few were more interested in the promise, and, unfortunately, some were not strong enough to believe other than as their parents did.

"How's home?" Alan asked quietly. All eyes turned to Salvador.

"Quiet. Ever since the letter." He answered calmly. "I should be disowned in a few weeks. You're sure it's not a problem?"

"Yes." Alan answered easily. "Velorian double-checked with him."

"Well then. It's all good. You know, they may not disown me. They might decide to call me back to 'reconvert' me. I may have no choice."

"I'm sure they can be convinced otherwise." Alan answered calmly. Salvador barked a laugh and nodded.

"I suppose you would know." Salvador cocked his head aside. "You know, my dad says Velorian Mayfair is close with the Malfoys. Why are you so sure of him?"

Alan smiled thinly. "Because I know him. And I know he's good friends with Lucius. And I know Lucius already made a huge mistake towards converting him. Velorian isn't as much of an airhead as he seems."

Salvador nodded slowly and smiled. "That wouldn't say much from what my uncle says having met him at a social dinner."

"No," Alan agreed. "It wouldn't. But it does."

Salvador shrugged and laid his head back in the chair. "How much longer till it's a sane hour?"

"Twenty minutes." Lucille answered. "Stop griping"

"You know you love me Lucille."

"It only goes so far Salvador."

"I love you too."

Alan smiled wryly, and looked back at the hall to his dorm. Blaise stalked out with a scowl, tailed by a yawning Theodore. Quickly, Alan stood. "Well, I'm going to breakfast, sane hour or not."

Several complaints came immediately, but Alan was heading towards the door without looking back. Blaise was the first to catch up, jogging up to him with a scowl.

"Alan, how many times do we tell you to not head off like that?"

"How many times do you deny it when I tell you all you're mother-henning me spare?" Alan returned.

"We do not mother-hen you."

"Delusional!" Alan announced. "You're deluding yourselves, every one of you!"

"We are not!"

"Are too!"

"Alan!" Blaise whined. "For Merlin's sake, you're a brat!"

"Finally, you admit it. Merlin, Mary and Mordred."

Blaise walked sullenly beside him, silent as the rest of the group caught up, Salvador laughing quietly as he paced on Alan's left side, which Blaise had ignored in favour of his right. It was a technicality that amused Alan to no end. Behind Salvador was the weedy Malcolm Baddock, now a second year, who watched the older students like a hawk. He'd tagged along almost the entirety of last year, wilfully running errands for them and listening in on many conversations. Alan had watched his tongue every time he was around; Malcolm hung out with several other students who Alan wasn't nearly so sure about. Behind him, Dillan Baker watched Malcolm intently. He had been one of the most suspicious when the second year had begun to tag along. Alan let him watch. Dillan was one of the kids he was the surest of; his family firm allies the Hodges, thus determinedly neutral.

The dynamics of the group changed as they walked out of the dungeons. The smiles faded to smirks. The laughter quieted to chuckles and snickers. Several changed their bearing into firmer,

more threatening strides. Alan himself felt the meek cast come upon him. It had been very useful in diverting attention, so his face blanked, he fell back slightly to walk shoulder-to-shoulder with Blaise, rather than a few steps before, and his gaze lowered slightly. Blaise shot him a concerned glance, but with his stern face it was lost to most everyone else. The only ones who didn't change much were Dillan and Malcolm.

Lucille and Salvador entered the dining hall first, talking with their heads together, touching each other gently and discretely. While they were truly a couple, they played it up or down at will in order to get the reactions they wanted. The two of them were surprisingly agile actors; they took the brunt of the attention of the older years and let Alan's group buffer against the lower ones.

Of course, sitting down the dynamics went nearly back to normal, as the group turned inward to hide their more subtle responses.

"Alan, you do realize you bug me whenever you give someone that damn quiet look?" Lucille shot. She was quickly filling her own plate, but gave Alan a dark look that reminded him she was more than willing to go back to her third year and force food on him like she had when he'd still been feeling out of sorts from the basilisk poison the last month or so of school. Unable to think about food without feeling ill, Lucille had sat next to him during the meals and held him in place until he ate. It had not been fun. Complaining to Severus and Geoffrey had proven they were on Lucille's side. He hadn't tried not eating again.

Giving her a look in kind, Alan pulled together his own meal defiantly and answered. "It's quite effective in keeping Umbridge from being much harsher with me. She seems focused on Potter who's far more forthright than I am. I don't want to draw her eye, especially after last week." Alan purposefully reached for the pitcher in front of Lucille with his right hand, giving her a good look at the healing pink scar across the back of his hand. Neville, Harry, and Blaise had identical scars. Pomfrey had been livid when she hadn't been able to make them fade. Alan mildly hoped Umbridge got sick at some point that year and asked for aid; Pomfrey would be simply delighted.

"How's your homework doing?" Salvador asked kindly. Alan shot him a grateful look.

"It's pretty much fine. I didn't get the essay for Binns done all that well, but with how he teaches, the class is useless anyways. All I do is sleep through it and read the book for homework. It's no different than normal. I got Ancient Runes and Potions done fine, and Herbology is okay. I'll take care of the rest during lunch and after dinner."

Salvador nodded and Lucille's sharp gaze softened as he raised his eyebrows at her in regards to his plate. Honestly. She complained about how thin he was, but he'd grown another full inch over the summer and was still going. Geoffrey had estimated that he'd easily pass six feet, so it was going to be a while before he started filling out rather than shooting up. Lucille was just going to have to deal with poking at his ribs until then. It was currently annoying to have her be taller than him.

"Alan, you haven't touched your juice." Lucille commented lightly.

Alan resisted the urge to grind his palm into his forehead. "Lucille, I haven't started eating yet either. Don't worry," He clarified, "I'll eat before class. Trust me, I do not want to make you bug me about this again."

He turned from Lucille's grin to check those entering and sent a discrete wave and smile at Stephanie as she led her seventh year friends in. As they came, he saw one of them turn and glare at the boy entering behind her. Words were exchanged; the boy flinched, grumbled, and then walked away sullenly, fingering his prefect's badge as though it had failed him. The girl turned back and exchanged a high-five with Stephanie. That would be the Head Girl, then. Stephanie's friends didn't openly support Alan, but they supported Stephanie and, completely coincidentally of course, supported Alan. With the daughter of the old minister of magic, the Head Girl, and all of them old blood and intelligent, they were pretty much immune to censure from their comrades, and able to act for themselves. Alan smiled to himself as he turned back to eating and then flinched from Lucille's glare.

“Fine, I’m eating already!”

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After breakfast was Herbology, which Alan found to be unfortunately set before Potions. It meant he had to spend nearly five minutes washing up enough to be absolutely sure none of what they’d been working out would foul up his potion-making. Green had lectured him several times on it, but, more effective than his lectures, were his examples. After hearing of the third time Green had turned a potion into an explosion due to something remaining on his hands, Alan learned to make an efficient job of it.

Potions was fortunately back to being normal and effective. Without Umbridge breathing down their necks, Alan returned to his seat in the front, which put Harry back in his mid-way seat and allowed the rest of their houses to organize themselves without conflict. It had been amusing to see the amount of distress a change in order had caused the house dynamics. Of course, the Slytherins hadn’t minded all that much; Draco was furiously intent upon sucking up to Umbridge in a far different manner than Alan was. Alan was avoiding her ire; Draco was trying to curry favour. But not having her in Potions was a blessing Alan was not giving up. Fortunately, Umbridge was not perfectly allowed to be a petty bitch about her invasive questions and had been forced to concede that Snape was a good, effective teacher and quite capable of teaching students according to the ministry guidelines.

Snape stormed into the classroom and Alan smiled as he came in, already looking forward to the class, even if the potions were below his skill level. It was the only problem of having learned much from his expansive American teachers. Some classes thereafter were too easy; of course, some weren’t, as he’d learned a few useless skills as well. He wouldn’t give it up, though. His knowledge, while having gotten him into trouble with the Triwizard Tournament, easily saved his life. Whether it had been useful or not in the last instance was not something he considered. Geoffrey and his godfather had lectured him on it often enough: no amount of skill could counteract a stacked deck completely. Koreol had thoroughly agreed, which lent much credence.

'It was not his fault'

Noting that he'd almost made a mistake in his potion, Alan paused, refocused and returned to paying attention to the class. Inattention: the curse that had killed six people at Salem in the potions lab. He would not be doing that here. Green had firmly impressed upon Alan the main accidents to avoid in Potion-making through repeated, impressively catastrophic examples ranging from death, to copious redecorating, and one remarkable and fortunately temporary sex change.

Across from him, seated by Theo, Daphne wasn't paying attention to her potion either. Alan elbowed Blaise and pointed her out; Blaise leaned over to whisper in her ear. Daphne coloured, and then spun around to hiss at Blaise,

"I was not staring vacantly!"

Alan rolled his eyes and drawled back, "You were so, Daphne. Pay attention to your potion before it boils over."

Daphne squeaked and obeyed. She was rather warmly coloured as the rest of class went by. Alan just smiled to himself. He hoped he never acted that smitten with someone. Daphne had been staring across the Hall at Harry at breakfast as well. She'd done so all last week, too.

Lunch was after Potions, and homework was easily knocked off in the library as they waited for the next class, to which only Tracey did not join them. She had a free period and took advantage of it to finish off her own homework; the rest of them attended Ancient Runes, pairing up Daphne with Theodore and Alan with Blaise. They took seats in the back of the classroom, just across the aisle from where Neville and Hermione always sat. It was disgustingly sweet to watch them bend over each other's books and giggle. Alan wondered how long it had taken for Harry to clue in they were a couple; he'd noticed it the first time he'd seen them in this class. However, they certainly got their work done extraordinarily well. Anthony Goldstein was partly resisting agreeing with anything Hermione worked on for jealousy.

He'd tried to get Neville into a duel several times, but just couldn't manage to get him anywhere alone. His attempts last year had had Blaise laughing for weeks.

Ancient Runes went into Transfiguration, where McGonagall worked them all with strict precision. Blaise had complained of house prejudice until he'd spoken with Neville about it; then he'd complained of her being a slave driver, but never in her hearing. Alan suspected the uniform expectations had impressed Blaise against his will; Alan just worked on the assignments and didn't pick them to death like most of his housemates did. It must have been a factor of his rather open upbringing. They were all expected to behave like good little stereotypes; Alan just wanted to be himself. He had firmly shot down an arrogant Blaise in first year with that determination and had unexpectedly gained a friend from it.

It was supper that held that day's excitement. Alan was planning to leave when a blonde Ravenclaw stood and walked down the table to stand behind Lucille, who was seated across from Alan. Alan remembered her – it was Luna Lovegood, whom he'd asked to the Yule Ball. He sat back to wait and see what she would say.

"Alan Prince?" She asked breezily. If he didn't know better, he'd think she'd wandered over by accident.

"Yes?" He asked. She certainly wasn't dangerous.

"The Sorting Hat suggested I should ask you to Hogsmeade with me. Would you like to come?"

Alan blinked several times. A double-check didn't change the sentence. She'd just asked him to Hogsmeade because of the Sorting Hat?

Alan shrugged. "Sure, Luna. Meet you in the front hall, then?" There were worse reasons to go out with someone, and it wasn't likely to ruin his day. She had an interesting way of looking at things that would probably be quite entertaining.

Luna smiled brightly at him and winked before wandering back to her seat. Alan shook his head again, and then leaned on his elbow to watch her go back to her table and sit down without a care in the world.

"Did you just ... accept a date with Loony Lovegood?" Dillan asked incredulously.

"Her name is Luna." Alan corrected absently. "And there are worse people I could go out with." He shot a short glance at Lucille and then grabbed his bag and walked out of the Great Hall. He did have homework to do, and there was a strange light feeling in his chest. He couldn't wait to see what would happen in Hogsmeade with Luna.

A/N: I love you people all so very much for reading this, and the reviews I've gotten! I'm sending a big hug! I would also like to say that I have posted one of my oneshots as well, and I hope it's appreciated. It has spoilers for the beginning of Fifth year. I will put up another one possibly in a month, possibly sooner, and I am still open to any requested scenes. Sixth year is being revised (I'm not quite happy with it) hence the lack of change to weekly updates. But it's really really good, I promise! (or at least I do hope you will think so)

Thank you very much for reading! Please review?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-three

The week before the Hogsmeade weekend left Harry feeling antsy. He remembered seeing Luna walk over to the Slytherin table and felt quite certain that she'd probably asked Alan out. It was eating at him, because ever since he'd really wanted to ask Susan out. He'd almost asked during Arithmancy last week, but Susan had been talking animatedly with Hannah, and hadn't waited behind, leaving him without a chance. Neville had encouraged it, telling him he'd ask someone interhouse if he weren't currently tied up with Hermione, a fact that had been reinforced by their very friendly studying that seemed to include referencing the other person's book a lot. It had gotten to the point that Harry had begun finding another corner to study in. Remaining had felt like he was invading their privacy.

With Neville moving into a relationship with Hermione, Harry found himself sitting and staring across the Great Hall with an absent look on his face. Beside him, Ron was fidgeting. Harry suspected he was having the same difficulty.

His staring made him jump when Susan and Hannah both stood up to leave the Great Hall, and Ron abruptly stood beside him. "Harry, come with me. I wanna ask Hannah, and you like Susan. Please?"

Harry looked up at Ron in surprise. Ron wasn't usually that brave when it came to girls. However, it was a good idea, so he grabbed his bag and jogged after Ron, cursing his friend's much longer legs. They were out in the Great Hall before Ron called out,

"Hannah, wait!"

Hannah stopped, and blushed when she saw it was Ron. Harry saw a small, hopeful smile on Susan's face and felt his own face colour even as he smiled back. He huffed as he stopped and then impulsively bowed.

"Would you honour me with your presence in Hogsmeade this weekend, Susan?" He asked. Beside him, Ron stammered through his own question with a brilliant colour to his face, clearly feeling put-

upon by Harry's show. He hadn't intended to embarrass Ron; it was just the first way to ask that had come to his tongue without getting caught in a knot. Watching Susan, he smiled when she paused, before she curtseyed politely.

"Thank you, Harry. I accept." She straightened when he did and playfully asked, "Should I dress up for it, or no?" Harry's strengthened blush was answered in her cheeks, and she smiled shakily. "No need, I suppose?"

"No," Harry reassured her, "No need. That was just how it lined up best, asking like that."

Susan gave him another small smile, and then turned away to take Hannah's hand and hurry off to the Hufflepuff dorms. Ron scowled at him.

"Why'd you ask her like that?"

"It was the only thing that came out."

"You made me look bad!" Ron groused. "I thought we were asking together."

"I'm not going on a double-date with you on the first time I go out with Susan!"

"Thanks, mate, I really appreciate it." Ron growled sarcastically.
"Don't talk to me."

"No problem. Go pout upstairs, Ron."

Ron stormed off and Harry paused before he huffed and stalked down the hall. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Alan look his way and then turn back to Blaise. The thought sent him up the next stairs, to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. They'd avoided it save for when they'd gone the week before to finish off Harry's Animagus. He hadn't managed to perfect the incantation that week, but since then, he was fairly confident in having it down. It was just after supper, Wednesday. Curfew wasn't for two hours, and he had his homework for the next

day done. He could finish the stuff for Friday later. If, as he suspected, Alan followed him, he'd be able to work out the transformation fine.

Myrtle came out at his presence immediately. "Oh, Harry! How nice of you to visit me!"

"Yeah, it's good. Hey, has anyone been poking around here, and asking after me or Alan?"

"Yes!" Myrtle said with relish. "That horrible, ugly toad came in here and poked in all my corners, demanding to know what you and Alan did in here. I told her you just talked with me, and never came together, and you were both so very nice and polite." Myrtle frowned. "She didn't like that. She kept asking about the Chamber, and if you went down there and how to get in. She threatened to have me exorcised!" Myrtle cried. She swooped down to Harry's face and whispered, "Do you think she can do that? She was so very mad."

"I don't know much about exorcising," Harry allowed, "but feel free to go hide in the chamber if it helps if they come after you, alright?"

Myrtle smiled brightly. "Thank you so much! I knew you'd have a word for it."

Harry smiled, and then jumped as the door opened behind him. He whirled, drawing his wand in a smooth motion and then paused and smiled when he saw it was Alan. Alan raised his eyebrow at him and drawled, "What do you think you're doing in here, Potter?"

"Talking to Myrtle, Prince, like we promised. Do you ever bother coming in here?"

Alan's face cracked into a wry smile. "Whenever the hens get too feisty. Right, Myrtle?"

"Oh yes, he comes in every once in a while. Doesn't even always go down the pipes. Sometimes they come after him; it's funny to see him get hauled back out." Myrtle laughed brightly. Alan coloured and snorted.

"See if I ever talk to you again." He drawled.

Myrtle came up behind him to look over his shoulder. "You threatened that last time, too, you know."

Alan rolled his eyes. "Fine, I desist. You win. I keep coming back. However, I think Harry came with a plan in mind, correct?"

Harry nodded slowly and then walked to open the Chamber. It was simple; Alan followed him down without a word, and the walk to the main room was silent, as it almost always was between them. Neither felt a need to talk. Alan opened the door to the main chamber, and then, once he entered, he immediately changed, darting to the chair and leaping to the back of it in one bound. He staggered, caught his balance and turned back to Harry with a smug look on his feline face. Harry smiled, and then paused, calling up the incantation in his mind. He didn't even speak it as the words rolled through the front, reminding him of his occlumency as they took all of his attention. He felt loose, free, insubstantial, and then everything settled into the state his trance had brought, except now he could move.

Harry shook his head and felt it roll down his spine. The feeling was what he would assume a dog felt when shaking, but he had no fur, only smooth, leathery scales. He took a moment to orient himself, and then a streak of dark fur ran across his vision. He reacted before he logically knew what was there, racing forward with four legs in a pounding, ground-eating run. He knew it was Alan, it was just play. He held back the need to jump and bite and kill, but let the need to chase run free.

They bounded the length of the chamber, and Alan turned quickly just before the statue, rebounding off the stone feet and running almost beneath Harry's feet. Purposefully, Harry snapped too late, and flexed and folded his spine at a nigh-impossible angle to copy the kneazle's move, turning and jumping a distance he never would have imagined crossing. He was one damn agile lizard!

They chased back and forth, Alan trying unsuccessfully to outmanoeuvre Harry and not quite succeeding. He was certainly a quick kneazle, but Harry had longer, stronger legs, with a whip-like

tail to keep him balanced. Harry concluded he was pretty much a reptilian greyhound. He wondered whether he was faster than Neville or not. He suspected not; his chest wasn't deep enough, and he was smaller than the horse, although still larger than Blaise.

The hour went faster than he expected, chasing Alan around the chamber in pointless, endless circles. He was surprised when Alan changed back and consulted his watch. He sat down, wondering how funny it looked, and then jumped when Alan spoke. He sounded really weird!

"Harry, the hour's been and gone. We've been running around for nearly an hour and a half. You can change back."

Harry almost couldn't think of how to change back and nearly panicked. He needed to be human again! The change happened on that thought, a feeling of rearrangement even as he seemed insubstantial. Harry overbalanced and staggered a moment before he adjusted to the changed centre of balance and straightened.

"How come Blaise and Neville didn't seem disoriented?" Harry demanded.

Alan chuckled. "Number one, they're too stubborn. Number two, both of them sat shortly afterwards, didn't you notice?"

Harry paused to think about it and then laughed, a good, hard laugh. It felt nice.

It made him regret his fear again even more. Could he openly befriend Alan? Or should he wait, and tell his father more directly?

Why did it become more difficult now that he'd decided to do it?

He was looking forward to Hogsmeade. Hopefully Susan would be less complicated than this.

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Alan waited patiently in the courtyard, leaning against the wall and watching for Luna's abrupt blonde hair, and, most likely, odd clothes. He was simply wearing jeans and a windbreaker – he refused to wear robes when he didn't have to. He'd been highly amused to see Geoffrey in his robes, but was simply waiting with bated breath for Umbridge to find out he'd slit the damn things up the sides to his hips. The excuse was for mobility. The reason was to thumb his nose at the Brits. Severus had been highly amused. Alan simply wasn't all that surprised, although he did ask if he could do the same to pair or two of robes for himself. Severus was a little conflicted, so he hadn't done it yet.

"Waiting on the space-case?"

Alan looked over and then smiled warmly at Blaise. The comment from him wasn't insulting – he'd lose a limb to his girlfriend if it were, as Ginny and Luna were good friends. She'd also -somehow, he wasn't sure how- pulled Dillan into her sphere of influence, but Blaise was her boyfriend and it was known throughout the entire school. The interest it had gathered had nearly blown up, until news got around of Ginny's dressing-down of her brother when he tried to argue with her about it. He hadn't succeeded. Alan suspected Harry had had a very hard time not laughing his ass off at it.

"Yeah. Waiting on ginger-bread yourself?"

"Yeah." Blaise returned. "You aware that Harry and the littlest Weasley both asked their Hufflepuffs?"

"You think I wouldn't be?" Alan asked incredulously. "Or have you turned your ears deaf to the nefarious plans Daphne keeps coming up with to make Harry break out of his shell and ask her out? Or at least get Susan back for the perceived slight."

"Well, I usually try to tune her out, yeah." Blaise offered. "She's not got anything mean planned?"

Alan smirked. "I informed her of the risks of angering Potter by being too cruel, yes."

Blaise shook his head. "That'll be interesting. Ever consider setting her loose on the Umbitch?"

Alan's face blanked for a moment, before it cleared and he shook his head. "No." He sighed, rubbing his palm to his forehead. "No, because I know the Weasley twins have something fucking big coming and I really want to see that."

"Ah." Blaise allowed. He was watching him now, though, and Alan resented the attention. He was not delicate, dammit, and did not need watching. He opened his mouth to scathe Blaise, when his eyes fell upon a blonde and a redhead moving through the press towards them. Feeling a little foiled, Alan gave Blaise a scowl and sent a calm smile to their approaching dates. Luna came out first, and smiled dreamily up at him. Crab apples were today's earrings; Alan suspected they were actually the fruit itself, and wondered why she kept up with that, but found it endearing rather than annoying.

"You need to stop griping," Luna announced. "The delicate issue isn't really that inaccurate."

Alan stopped in place and just stared. She couldn't read minds; he'd have felt that! And wasn't that a little foolish of a line to start out on, poking at sore spots? What the freaking Hell ...

"Luna, be nice." Ginny scolded. "You do know better than that. You must've hurt his feelings."

"But he needs to get over it." Luna answered, staring straight up at Alan with her distracted smile. "But I suppose I can wait till later. I'm looking forward to Hogsmeade, aren't you? Maybe I can learn more of what I shouldn't say."

Alan swallowed and smiled tensely back. She was a bit contagious, he supposed. He was feeling a lot more relaxed than normal, even. "Alright." He found himself saying. "Let's go, then?"

Luna gave him a brilliant smile and wound her arm over his left, leaning her head against his shoulder. She was a bit shorter than him, just tall enough for it to be quite comfortable. Alan led her out with

only a short look behind himself to see Blaise already talking quietly with Ginny, who was watching him and smiling and nodding happily.

Thinking about Ginny made him wonder about Ron, and, additionally, Harry. Alan scanned the crowd for them, or at least Ron for Harry's height made him hard to spot, but the only redheads he found were the twins, heads together, talking fast as they filed out past a disapproving Filch. Mildly disappointed, Alan turned back to watching where he was going on the long walk out to Hogsmeade, and the comfortable silence.

"Does it still scare you that much to think of being delicate?" Luna asked absently.

Alan stiffened, but forced himself to relax. Luna was beginning to discomfort him. Her absent comments were ones he couldn't label as either purposeful or simply curious, and it frustrated him to not be able to tell. He labelled uncertainty as hostility, and it was a struggle to fight it back. "I don't know, Luna." Alan temporized.

"It isn't that bad to be thought delicate." Luna answered breezily. "A lot of people think things are delicate that aren't. It makes them underestimate them; they don't expect them to bounce back quickly. My mother died when I was nine, you know. I can see the thestrals. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

Alan wondered if Harry would say the same, with his interest in magical creatures. He thought they were a bit like the jabberwock – visually disturbing, certainly interesting, but to be admired from afar. They were nothing he wanted to go near if he didn't have to.

"Do you think I'm delicate?" Luna asked, turning to watch his face.

Alan stopped walking for a moment to look over her. Was she delicate? Yes, she certainly looked it. Her breezy attitude made her seem a pushover, insubstantial. So, "Yes, it does seem that way."

"You seem a bit delicate too. Most people are who have been hurt. But the seeming and the being are two different things, aren't they?" Luna's eyes cleared, focusing on his with determination. "I know you

seem delicate, but you aren't. I know that too. Some of your friends don't, because you get lost in playing broken. They start to think it's not playing. Are you so sure it isn't?"

Alan fell silent as she finished, leaving him to his thoughts by facing forward once more and restarting their walking. She'd given him a lot to think about; he hadn't expected her to analyze him so much, and so thoroughly. She'd echoed a complaint Lucille had made earlier in the week, that whenever he stepped outside the commons, he became so meek she feared it wasn't an act. He'd insisted it was, but a short thought to earlier, before Luna had arrived and when Blaise had accused him of being delicate, he remembered becoming meek without even thinking about it. Maybe that act wasn't worth its price. He'd have to step up. It's not like Umbridge could use the blood quill again.

Resigned to warming up his public act, Alan shook his head and turned back to attending to Luna. "What's your favourite place in Hogsmeade?"

Luna smiled dreamily up at him. "The Shrieking Shack, of course. I hear it's the most haunted place in Britain, but I can't seem to find any ghouls within. I've wandered there several times, in fact, and never found any ghosts, although I heard someone say that it had been screaming again my second year. Your third."

Alan nodded silently, wondering the same thing. "Well, I've yet to find anything telling us we can't go check it out. Do you want to go? It'd certainly be fun, I think."

Luna smiled brightly up at him, and then let go to run through the village, giggling. Alan blinked a moment, and then ran after her to catch up. He kept pace easily, but watching her smile and enjoy the running he laughed in return and enjoyed it without concerning himself with the people they passed.

Luna slowed before they were quite there, and Alan slowed with her. He could run further, Geoffrey had insisted on it, but it wouldn't have been much and he wanted to stay with Luna. They walked through the few trees before the fence lining the shack, laughing quietly

together, and then they stared out at the rickety building with small smiles.

Luna eyed it and tilted her head with a small smile. "It's very old and shabby, isn't it?"

"Quite." Alan agreed. He eyed the simple fence, and then beyond to the boarded up house and its rampant garden. "Care to head closer?"

Luna eyed him and then smiled dimly, walking over to eye the fence. "But how am I to get over the fence?" She asked.

Alan eyed her for a moment. She was a few inches shorter than him, and quite thin. He could probably do it ... "I could lift you over, if you like."

She gave him a large smile. "Wonderful."

Alan smiled back and then did so, staggering a little but managing to get her across. He simply clambered over after her himself; that was what jeans were for, anyways. Luna was in plain school robes, which was almost a disappointment after her dress for the Yule Ball.

Up close, the Shack wasn't much different than it appeared from farther away. The doors were all locked and sealed shut with spells Alan didn't know offhand and didn't feel like trying to break for just exploration. Luna looked at seemingly unimportant areas that, when Alan looked closer, appeared to be scratched badly by something fairly strong.

"What might that be?" Alan asked.

"I don't think this place was haunted, or at least it wasn't just." Luna commented airily, fingering the scratches and stepping forward to eye a high-up window. "Could I take a look? There's a crack ..."

Alan shrugged. "Get on my shoulders. You're a little wispy thing; it shouldn't be too hard."

Luna turned to smile at him, and did so. Alan stood with a bit of difficulty – he braced himself against the house to keep his balance as Luna leaned forward to look within. A small spell of hers sent light within and she hummed pleasantly. “Down.” She asked. Alan gratefully did so. Light though Luna was, it didn’t make holding her up much easier.

She giggled as she landed, and held onto his arm supposedly for support. “I was right.” She tittered. “Scratches and claw marks everywhere.”

“What do you think did it?” Alan asked.

“Werewolf. It must’ve been a student. Maybe this was for safety. Don’t you think the claws could be that? Of course, it could be a warg too.”

Alan looked the outside scratches over again and eyed the too high window with irritation. “Possibly. Wouldn’t it be a little controversial to have a werewolf as a student at the school?” He was also wondering how it had gotten out of there to scratch the outside. What a meddlesome kid. Not that he really had room to talk ...

Luna shrugged. “I heard the Shrieking Shack only got locked a few decades ago.”

Alan gave her a wry smile. “Which meant that it was during Dumbledore’s tenure. Figures.” He eyed the shack once more and shrugged. “Well, whatever it is, it’s not making anything more known to us. Any other plans?”

Luna hummed under her breath and grabbed his hand to pull him back to the fence. He helped her over once more, followed, and then they walked back to the village in silence. Luna half-skipped as she walked seemingly aimlessly around the village and Alan finally grabbed her hand to pull her closer.

“Luna, are you going anywhere at all?”

“Not really.” She breezed. “Why, do you have somewhere in mind?”

Alan gave her a mildly frustrated smile and shook his head. "How about the Three Broomsticks? I'll buy you lunch."

Luna gave him a brilliant smile. "Wonderful. Maybe we can attract some princhetts!"

"And how do you attract princhetts?" Alan guardedly asked.

"Leaving a tip and sharing a meal." Luna promptly answered.

Alan blinked as he followed her. He thought mildly longingly of the discussion at the Shrieking Shack, and then caught up with her in the pub, ordering two meals and then tailed Luna to a table by a window. Just next to them, Alan was mildly surprised to find Neville and Hermione sitting alone in the booth, their heads pressed together over a page full of spiky runes. He wondered if they were actually discussing the runes or something else entirely, but then he was sitting by Luna and he smiled thinly at her. She gave him a curious, vacant look.

"You know, I'm not the only one playing a role in public." He said quietly. Luna just smiled at him. Alan frowned thoughtfully. "Why do you?"

"Why would I act like something other than what I am? I'm comfortable. Besides, the vacancy lets the wind clear the cobwebs away." She commented. "Like the Hogwarts song. 'Our heads could do with filling, with some interesting stuff, for now they're bare and full of air, dead flies and bits of fluff!'"

Alan winced at her singing, and gave her a stern look. She smiled vacantly back as the waitress placed their plates down, but Alan found a small tightening in the corners of her eyes that made him turn thoughtful again. What was she hiding? What was she doing, really? Her absent attitude was a puzzle and a half. Perhaps she was having trouble shedding her shell. "How about this: you try and shed your act and I'll put more work into mine."

"You were going to drop yours without compulsion." She accused. Her tone was surprisingly direct. "I'll be level with you since you can't seem to handle being thrown off course."

Alan winced; he hadn't wanted to make her angry. "It just seems hypocritical of you. What good does it do to be seen as a flake?" He toned it into an honest question, keeping accusation out of his tone.

Luna sighed and picked at her plate. She then snagged a chip off his plate and ate it. Alan determinedly waited her out. She finally gave, staring absently out the window with a tight expression that didn't suit her.

"It does little but divert attention. I'm strange enough acting normal, but when I'm aggressively strange they avoid me. Steal my things, laugh behind my back, but they don't go near me. It's better than it would be otherwise. My father reassured me I was normal, and now I'm seeing otherwise. But what is there to do? I am who I am. I won't change, not for them. Driving people away is easy. I felt ... you didn't seem put off after the Yule Ball, even though I know you only asked me to keep the general populace off your back. I wondered if you'd accept when I asked, but it's not like it would get worse if you didn't. Now ..."

Alan reached over and pulled Luna's left hand into his, smiling slightly without looking at her. "It's nice to talk to someone who's got a different view of things." He answered. "I knew a bunch of weird people back in America, who didn't care what others thought. Green, Andrew, Jannicke ... they were all firmly determined to be themselves. Lyall ... It's a wonderful thing to be who you are, but you should be careful not to be so weird as to drive away the people who actually like you. Sure, it works excellently against your enemies, but if you don't even stop it with your friends ..."

Luna shrugged, and then looked back up at him. Her prominent grey eyes looked over at him with a look that was curious, but behind it Alan wondered if she wasn't scared as well. She'd asked him out. She hadn't known how he'd react, but she'd done so in front of his friends, his Slytherin friends. Most people would've been scared. Hell, sometimes he even found them scary. Alan gave her a warm smile

back, and then reached across to steal one of her chips. She blinked at him, and he smiled.

“So, what do princhetts do anyways?”

Luna smiled back at him and then merely shrugged, her face becoming pleased and self-satisfied. She didn’t answer. Alan raised his eyebrow and she leaned over to grab another of his chips.

“Lots of things.” Her hand was lingering on his plate, her face halfway across the table. Feeling mischievous, Alan reached across opposite her arm and brought his own face closer to hers, bringing them to looking in each other’s eyes with only several inches difference.

“Like?”

“They attract nargles too, even in the absence of mistletoe.” Luna breathed.

“And what do nargles do?” Alan asked again, feeling the beginnings of irritation.

She hummed, and then leaned impossibly forward and placed a light kiss on his lips. Alan sat back quickly and stared back over at Luna who smiled from where she was bent rather fully across the table, and then leaned back to eat another of his chips.

“They encourage flirting.”

“Oh.” Alan managed intelligently. His mind was currently rerunning the small kiss, and he finally shook his head to bring himself out of it, turning back to attending to his lunch. Luna did the same, in her quiet manner. They were silent for most of the rest of the meal, but Alan was watching her, feeling confused. She was insecure, from what she’d said, uncertain of herself. But he was damned if she wasn’t willing to take risks. They were almost finished when Alan noticed that Luna had a spare bite-sized piece of fish left. He looked up at her and found her staring without focus across the pub. He smiled lightly and leaned forward to snag the piece with his fork, pulling back and

finishing it off. Luna's eyes returned to watching him, and he gave her a warm smile.

"Just trying to make sure we'd shared enough to keep the princhetts happy."

Luna blinked and smiled dreamily. "A good cause."

Alan finished off his butterbeer and then stretched, sighing. "It's further into the afternoon now. We could visit Honeydukes or somewhere if you like."

Luna hummed, fishing out a coin for a tip and Alan stood quickly to offer her his arm on the way out. She happily wound hers around his and followed him out. "Scrivenshaft's?" She asked blithely.

Alan happily took her in the direction, but paused before he let her hand go to enter. He leaned down and gently kissed her back, feeling a faint tremor run through him at the touch. He pulled back, and Luna smiled up at him as though drugged.

"I really think you're susceptible to nargles, Alan." She commented. She sounded as though she didn't even know she was talking to someone.

Alan laughed quietly. "I must be. But I don't mind, either."

"Good." Luna returned. "Because I like it."

Alan blinked and let her slip inside. He wondered whether a normal date would be going any better than this, before he followed her inside.

Returning back outside, Alan still argued with Luna despite having already pocketed the eagle feather quill. It had been expensive, but she had insisted on gifting him with it. She called it in return for the muggle pen he'd gifted her with the year before at Christmas. It had alternating pen tips, so as to write in four different colours. She hadn't gotten him anything then, and Alan finally gave up and kept it, gently holding her hand as they walked out.

One look at Honeydukes was enough to make Alan wince. Just outside the door, Ron and Hannah were standing a few feet apart; both of them with their feet planted and from what Alan could see of Ron's face, they were not currently on good terms with each other. They were far enough they couldn't hear, but it wasn't long before Hannah threw her hands up in frustration and then stormed away. Ron was left glowering and grinding his teeth before he, too, began the stormy walk back to Hogwarts.

"See?" Luna commented dreamily. "That's what happens when you keep the nargles at bay."

Alan couldn't help it; he burst out laughing. Luna looked at him with a faint, uncertain smile and Alan smiled back through his laughter until he could speak again.

"Just ... I suppose that's a good thing of my susceptibility, eh?"

Luna's small smile widened. "Yes, it is."

She was so solemn Alan burst out laughing again.

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Harry strode back to the common room that evening with a skip in his step and a nervous twinge to his hands. It had gone well, but it could have gone better. Both him and Susan had repeatedly gotten tongue-tied upon trying to hold a conversation, and once they'd decided to wander again after a rather nervous lunch, they'd come across Ron and Hannah's foolish argument. It had left Susan in a bad mood, and Harry had finally given in and walked her back to the school. He was still pretty hopeful about it, though, and entered the common room with a small smile.

He was walking over to the stairs to the boy's dorm when he wondered momentarily where Neville and Hermione were. He hadn't seen them in Hogsmeade. He turned to scan the common room and froze when he looked at their usual seats before the fire. A glance made him smile awkwardly before he coughed and wandered over.

He wasn't noticed; Neville and Hermione were fully wrapped up in each other and the kissing was getting a little interesting to watch.

Harry coughed again.

Neville jolted upright, and Hermione squeaked as they came apart and glared up at the person interrupting them. Upon seeing Harry, Neville cut off one of his more common rude phrases.

"Harry, what's the bloody big idea of startling me?"

"Were you busy, Neville?" Harry offered, smiling bemusedly.

"Yes!"

Harry was impressed he managed the answer with a straight face. Hermione certainly didn't; she turned a rather brilliant pink and cuddled closer to Neville. Small snickers were breaking out in the areas nearby, and Neville finally huffed.

"Sit down, Harry, if you're going to talk. You're making a scene."

Harry sat, shaking his head quietly. "I don't know how you manage to be this shameless."

"Simple: I've already got them laughing at me for enjoying myself. I might as well handle the inevitable bearding with something resembling grace. Keeps the image positive. Stop huddling Hermione, or is my kissing that embarrassing?"

Unfortunately, the reminder brought more laughter from nearby, and any answer Hermione had was lost in another blushing fit. Neville gently stroked her chin, and kissed her forehead.

"Well, your mouth was divine." He whispered. Harry felt his own face heat up just listening. However, it made Hermione look up with a bit more confidence, so Harry shelved the embarrassment of listening to his utterly besotted friend and stood once more.

"You know," Harry offered, "I'll just leave you two to it and see about joining Ron as those who have not yet checked their brains fully for a woman."

Neville laughed. "I still get better test marks than you, Potter!"

Harry sent him a rude gesture and climbed back up the stairs. Their dormitory door was shut, but considering the mood Ron had left Hogsmeade in, it wasn't surprising. Harry knocked shortly before walking in. Ron's curtains were drawn, and Dean was working on homework. Not wanting to bother either, Harry fell onto his bed and sighed as he looked at Neville's empty bed and wondered for a moment why he felt so heavy now that Neville was clearly infatuated with Hermione. It felt a bit like he was losing him; even knowing the feeling was ridiculous. Neville was still there; just ... he'd replaced Harry with someone else as his closest friend, or similar.

Harry rolled over onto his stomach and waved his wand to shut the curtains. It wouldn't change much. He was just being resentful. Neville wasn't even his best friend, Alan was. Neville was just ... his brother. And the closest person he could hang with. He couldn't just hang with Alan, because he didn't want to give up the game yet about the Slytherins.

Harry beat his pillow and then cursed into the soft confines. He would get over this. It wouldn't change anything, and if it did it was simply inevitable and not something he should gripe about. Hermione was his friend too.

Maybe it was just hormones. Harry rolled onto his back and went to change.

If it was just hormones, he could live without the damn things. They made everything complicated.

||||

Sunday rolled about in a sunny bliss against the encroaching winter, and last minute additions to homework were attended to from the grounds outside. Neville and Hermione seemed to have moved even

closer to each other since their kiss last night, and Harry felt a little put off at the amount of casual touching that seemed to just ‘accidentally’ happen. Hermione fell into giggles several times, and Ron had a bit of difficulty getting their attention to help with his work. Finally, though, Neville sat up and directed Hermione to help Ron as he shifted around to Ron’s other side to sit by Harry. Harry didn’t immediately give him a response, but instead continued his blank stare at his Potions homework. Finally, Neville bumped his shoulder, and spoke.

“I’m not going to forget you, you know.”

“Took you long enough to get around to remembering.” Harry answered curtly. His self-recrimination for the sour answer went unseen.

“Yeah, well.” Neville shrugged awkwardly. “It’s new, and I don’t want Hermione thinking I’m uncomfortable with her. It’s hard, trying to keep it all in order.”

Harry ran his hand over his hair. His stress made him not care how messy it would end up being. “I know, Neville, it just feels irritating to me.”

“I can see that.” Neville answered. “After all, you’re not all that close with Ron, are you?”

“No.” Harry answered in a small voice, not wanting Ron to hear. “And after he and Hannah had their little falling out, he’s been a right prat about everything. I don’t know whether Susan will talk to me anymore either. I don’t have a clue how well our date went. I think it was walking a fine line between being nice and sucking miserably.”

Neville was silent for a moment, and then answered, sounding almost sincere, “Glad you had such a wonderful first date.”

Harry reached over and clocked him firmly across the back of his head. Neville took it with a mouthed complaint, and then a wry smile. Harry couldn’t help but smile back, but he still returned with a rude

gesture. Neville simply let it slide off with a friendly nudge and a return to their homework.

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Monday went as expected. It was relatively boring, and none of the classes were unexpected until Defence, which always seemed to have something interesting going on. This time, Geoffrey walked in with an easy stride and eyed the class with a sigh.

"Well, as I've been teaching all of you, I've noticed a few of your struggle with some of your spells. It's been in all the classes, and thus I feel I should make a point here. I'm going to send a weak jinx at each of you in turn. Kindly perform the shield charm protego or get jinxed. It won't hurt, and I'll remove it immediately, but I would like to see just who manages this spell. Thus, Ms. Brown,"

Lavender squeaked. She didn't manage to hold the shield either. In fact, half the students didn't manage it. Dean's shield held long enough to stop the hex and then disappeared with a jolt, knocking his chair back an inch. Of all the Gryffindors, of which there were ten, only half managed their spells. The only one outside of Harry's group was another Gryffindor girl. Predictably, she belonged to an old-fashioned pureblood family and had probably been taught at home. Geoffrey shook his head.

"Alright, everybody out of your desks. You will not leave this class without knowing a few simple spells well enough to keep you on your feet. First off, we'll be learning the basic shield charm. It will keep you safe from many different spells, and although it has a few obvious failings, it is necessary. If someone casting against you is simply powerful, it won't help much, or if they cast an unforgivable or several other complicated, high-level spells, they'll just breeze right through your shield. That's when you dodge." He sniped. "We'll go over that in detail in December, which will be all improvisation. For now, you will learn this. It'll be helpful if someone is not expecting you to fight back. It will at least give you time. Now then, stand up, partner up, and practice. After this, you'll learn disarming, stunning, and then, after break, I'll have all of you do a project to perfect one offensive spell of

choice, in which I will give you as much aid as you need. But that's all later. Practice!"

The class was almost too easy for Harry and his friends until Geoffrey turned on them and shot a spell that shattered each of their shields. He bore down on their group with a serious look.

"I can see you all think this is too easy right now, but you're also not using the spell as well as you could. Only one of you is average in power," He gave a short nod at Ron, "and the rest of you should be strong enough to make me eat my spells. But you're not charging your shields enough. You have to add more concentration when up against someone who is sending everything they've got at you, or else your shield will crumple. Some people can't make up for it, but you, Harry, Neville and Hermione, each of you are above average in power. No one in this classroom should be able to overwhelm your shield, Harry, and additionally, if you can cast with all your power, no one should be able to shield against you either. You are one of two students in your year that has exceptional strength. Use it."

He turned away from Harry to look at Hermione, Neville and Ron. "And you, it doesn't matter that the word 'average' came up. I am not one of the stronger wizards out there. I get marginalized as 'average' all the time. But I know how to use what I have and can easily get the results I need, or, in fact, overwhelm someone stronger, because I know how to cast spells to their best effect. And I also know what spells would have the best effect even if they are not overly powerful. Pay attention, learn, and concentrate on keeping the power of your spell high. Now,"

Harry anticipated the coming spell and had his shield up. He still didn't manage to block the spell and swore as he waited for Geoffrey to counter it. Neville, Hermione and Ron were similarly out of sorts, Ron swearing angrily. Geoffrey rocked back on his heels and ended the spells, smiling roguishly.

"Concentration for strengthening spells is not something often learned; most people settle for what they currently have. The best book that describes it isn't in print here in Britain. I'll get you a copy in

a few days. For now, keep what I said in mind.”

He left their group to correct Lavender once more, and Harry gave Neville an exasperated look. Neville was looking thoughtful once more, and Ron and Hermione looked scolded.

“What are you pondering now, Neville?” Harry asked gruffly.

“How did he know so much about our strengths?”

“It’s a deeper form of legilimency, difficult but useful. Alan knows it, so I presume Geoffrey learned it first and then taught it to him.” Harry answered negligently. “It’s supposedly harder than regular legilimency, but some people just know innately about someone’s strength. My mother has it.”

“Great.” Neville drawled.

Harry just rolled his eyes and hexed him again. As expected, Neville blocked it easily. Harry noted with some concern that Ron now had a small, mutinous look on his face. It didn’t bode well. The reason was obvious, really, and Harry wished Geoffrey had kept his mouth shut. It had long been completely silently understood that Harry, Hermione, and Neville were better than Ron in pretty much everything. Ron had been silently resentful, but had never spoken up about it. It was just understood. But to be told, to his face, that he wasn’t as strong as them, and by a teacher he liked ...

Harry turned aside and forced the thought away. He couldn’t do anything about the truth. “Neville, how do you think you put more power into a spell?”

Neville looked at Hermione and shrugged. “He said something about concentration, maybe. I wouldn’t know ...” However, Neville was eyeing Harry carefully and Harry nodded slightly. It might be related to Occlumency, and while nobody knew it, both Harry and Neville knew the discipline. But Harry didn’t want to try it right then. Suddenly succeeding would only make Ron more resentful.

Neville noticed the change in expression and gave a neglectful shrug, turning to talk to Hermione again and effectively skiving off the rest of the lesson.

A/N: Yes, late Thursday but I said Thursday and I made it. Sorry.
hangs head in shame And growing up happens. Gotta love it. Just
you wait, we'll hit Christmas and get them back to school and then
the shit will hit the fan. grins So, things keep moving, and reviews are
always appreciated; if you make me happy enough, the schedule
might fluctuate. Thank you very much for reading!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ron sulked for the rest of the evening and the entirety of Tuesday. Harry, Hermione, and Neville's success in Charms class – even if Harry took a lot of the couple's attention in order to figure out how to work it – were met with angry glares, and a deep, sullen silence. However, it was after Harry and Ron trudged, sodden and discouraged back up to the common room after a very wet and useless Quidditch practice, that things finally exploded. Neville had Hermione in his lap as they looked over their Ancient Runes work. He saw them come in and smiled as he shot a spell to dry them out. Harry smiled at the pleasant change, but Ron finally burst.

"Gee, rub it in why don't you." He snarled. "I didn't need your help, Neville, so stop tossing it about like some party favour."

Most of the common room fell silent, and Neville gave Ron a startled look before he sighed quietly. "Sorry, Ron. I felt like offering to help; you were quite damp. It can't have been comfortable."

"Well I don't need you showing off, Neville, I already know you're some stubborn displaced Ravenclaw just like your girlfriend. If you're not snogging each other senseless, you've got your nose in a book like it's your goddamn best friend, never mind me and Harry sitting aside wondering what the Hell is going on. Oh, wait," Ron snarled, "Harry still has some fucking clue because you probably do his stupid homework for him. I'm just some poor, stupid lump who's not even worth your time!"

Ron moved to stalk out, but he was doused with two water balloons before he got far. Harry could feel the wash of cold that flowed off him. Ron whirled and found his twin brothers glaring at him, gently holding onto two more balloons with vindictive smiles.

"Ronnikins, where did you check your brain?" One asked.

"Right indeed, George, his brain does seem to have taken off."

"Neglected, I'm sure." George nodded.

“So, Ronnikins, done griping?”

“Felt that since you were so offended at being dry,”

“We might as well return you to the previous state.”

“Cold,”

“And wet.”

“Happy yet?” The last was a bitter smile. “We don’t need a Malfoy up here.”

“Ravenclaws are much more welcome.”

Ron glared at them and stormed upstairs. Harry looked over at them quietly. “You didn’t need to make him angrier.”

Fred waved him off. “He’s just getting all grouchy again, and it’s stupid of him.”

“Still,”

“Harry, shut up.” George said pleasantly. “You’re being ridiculous. You can’t defend him just because you’ve tried to be his friend. He’s the one throwing you away. He’ll either wise up, or he won’t. It’s his fault for not being able to handle being outdone. If he didn’t want to be outdone, he should have stuck with Seamus and Lavender. All of us know that you and Neville are excellent students, and Hermione is fighting with Neville for the spot of smartest in the school.”

“Well, him and Anthony Goldstein.” Fred finished. “Just don’t bother yourself about it.”

Harry sighed, but nodded slowly and walked back over to where Neville and Hermione were. Hermione had left his lap and was now bent intently over her essay, Neville holding a hand gently on her back, his worried gaze watching Harry come closer. Harry finally sat down with a limp flop and gave Neville a dejected look. Neville’s mouth twisted into a smile.

"Me, do your homework? Please, your grades would probably go down. I can't organize an essay to save my life."

Harry laughed. "At the least they certainly wouldn't be able to mistake your rambling for mine."

"Ron's just ridiculous. He's got some self-esteem issues, and can't manage to reconcile them with us right now. We do outdo him all the time, and it's not that we try, it just ..."

"Works out that way." Harry finished dully. "I know. I just don't like that I'm practically losing all my friends."

Neville's face fell and his hand closed against Hermione's back. Harry noticed and shot him a wan smile with a weak shrug. He wouldn't argue it. He understood, but ... it didn't alleviate the loneliness it brought of leaving him out of the loop. Sighing, he pulled out the book Geoffrey had gotten to them and began to read again.

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Alan was concerned with how down Harry appeared to be in the week after the Hogsmeade weekend. A glance at the Hufflepuffs found them to be in fairly high spirits; while Hannah had seemed irritable for a few days, she slowly calmed down and began to shoot cautious glances at the Gryffindor table. The lingering mood that hung over Ron, however, did little to encourage her in approaching him once more. Susan did a lot of giggling. Daphne tended to glare, so when Wednesday came around, and Daphne sat down at lunch with a self-satisfied little glance at the Gryffindor table, Alan knew something was up.

"Daphne ..."

"Potter's already sitting at the Gryffindor table and Bones isn't in yet." She announced.

Alan finally let himself give a small smile. "Will Bones be receiving a Slytherin gift upon her arrival?"

"Why, Prince, what makes you think that?" Daphne gave him an innocent look that Alan didn't buy for a moment.

"Your rather in depth plotting to gain Harry's favour is what. Just ... let's hope you won't make him angry with you instead."

Daphne smiled thinly. "If it does, oh well." Her smile dimmed as Alan's disappeared and she momentarily quailed at the steel in his eyes. "It's nothing permanent. Just ... Watch." She finished stubbornly, turning back to her meal.

Alan turned and Susan and Hannah both walked in together, chatting lowly. A loud 'splat' came – but nothing had fallen. Hannah and Susan both looked around abruptly, and then something made them look up – just in time for a bucket to dump its contents over them both and then disappear, leaving the two girls coated in milky white slime. Alan was impressed. Daphne had orchestrated it well, but he was worried about what effect the slime might have. A few Ravenclaws had followed them in, and Kevin Entwhistle stepped forward to help clean them up. Alan knew him through Theodore, who was still passingly friends with him. He'd been suggesting a few things to Theodore as well, things Harry had also hinted at, which Alan wasn't sure he wanted to attend to quite yet.

A few other students had stepped in to try and clean the girls up, and suddenly Susan let out a shriek of rage. Alan looked up and felt his eyebrows rise even as his temper reared. The slime had come off with the spells, but it had taken both girls' hair with it. There was only faint stubble of blonde for each of them. Hannah quailed, but Susan angrily grabbed her arm and stormed to the table, clean finally, and while she was clearly angry, the loss of her hair didn't seem to have panicked her too much after it had settled in, unlike Hannah who was now crying quietly. Alan turned back to Daphne.

"That was a little low." He commented. "Although good work. What was it, potion or spell?"

"Potion." She groused. She knew what his dry tone meant; they all did. "It was low."

"It isn't so much Susan's appeal as it's Harry's own mind that keeps him from asking you out, or accepting, Daphne. I doubt this will affect him much."

"I was more aimed at affecting Susan, Alan. I'm not stupid enough to attempt to change your 'friend'" Daphne clarified.

Alan sighed. "Fine." He left it at that. He was still irritated, but it wasn't permanent. Pomfrey could easily grow their hair back quickly, and it hadn't affected anything else. It had cleaned up completely as far as he could tell. It was also, apparently, having a bit of an opposite effect. Daphne left abruptly as she watched Harry get up and walk to the Hufflepuff table in order to apparently question the two. Of course, the Weasley twins followed. Alan would have to see if he couldn't get some of that potion to them as well. Umbridge without hair ... now that was a worthy goal.

After lunch was Transfiguration, and then Care of Magical Creatures, which had been moved inside. Everything went pretty much perfectly well, and finally they all gathered in the library – it had been requested by Blaise, because Ginny had wanted to study with them that day, citing something about her brother being a complete asshole. After witnessing the split during the mealtimes, Alan wasn't complaining. They settled around a table, and then paused when Ginny came over with a hesitant smile. Alan's breath caught a moment, and then he gave a gentle smile as he saw Luna standing blithely beside her. To her side as well was an apprehensive Melanie.

"Hi, um. I hope you don't mind but I brought Luna and Melanie with me. Melanie actually ..." Ginny fell silent and shot Melanie a tight look. Melanie sighed.

"Nanna told me something I felt you should know, and then Ginny insisted I pass it on to you all myself." She sent a dirty look to one side of the group and Alan felt a suspicion form; she was glaring at Malcolm. "She said she saw Malfoy pull Baddock aside when they came out of Potions. She said it looked like he was squealing on someone. I remembered Ginny knew Blaise and your big group, and

with my brother saying he thought Alan was right, I didn't think it'd be good to leave it unmentioned."

Alan rested his chin on his hand. "Neville told you that I'm 'right'?"

"No, I figured it out, although I've overheard him plotting with Harry about it." Melanie snorted. " Aside from that, I saw the aftermath of last year same as everybody. You're not lying, and Dumbledore doesn't condone torture. That means that, even if there is no Dark Lord, at the very least," the emphasis made it clear she didn't think there wasn't a Dark Lord at all, "the remaining Death Eaters are getting out of hand and something needs done. Not this stupid back-pedalling that the Ministry is doing. So," Melanie shot Malcolm a bright smile, "I thought you might want to know."

Malcolm was looking at her as though he wanted to curse her, but apparently he had some modicum of intelligence. That intelligence was busy watching Dillan with no small amount of fear. It was only a moment's thought before Alan agreed with him. Dillan was the scariest person to him right then; Alan felt he'd do a wonderful job convincing Malcolm that he was no longer welcome in their circle, better than he could do himself.

"Thank you, Melanie." Alan smiled warmly. "Please, feel free to join us for studying. I think Dillan and Malcolm have something to discuss."

Dillan stood, and most of the group focused on Malcolm with heavy interest. Malcolm stood with a tight expression. "Hey, guys ..." He tried. "You know how Malfoy is ..."

"Mhmm." Theodore offered, studying his fingernails. "That's what the group is for Baddock." Theodore spoke scornfully. "Keeping him away. You don't go off and buddy up to him, or let him have his way. Although ..."

"Enough." Dillan said. "We need just a moment."

"Hey," Malcolm tried. Dillan didn't let him say anything else and hauled him through the shelves towards the exit. Alan felt satisfied.

The Baker family was tied closely to the Hodges. Dillan had taken the time to learn some of the more intimate aspects of the Hodges' philosophies which meant that he was already well on his way to being part of the Hodges' realm, something Velorian described as the wizarding mafia. He'd take care of it. Melanie sat down awkwardly beside Ginny in Malcolm's old seat. Ginny, beside her, was already asking Blaise about how he'd handled the assignments she now had. Blaise finally rolled his eyes and advised her to wait for Dillan, as he was in her year. Melanie sighed, and pulled out her own work.

Alan watched her carefully, a small smile on his face. How come the younger siblings were so much more willing to openly cross the houses? Interhouse relations, he knew, intimidated Nanna, but first Ginny and now Melanie were both sitting comfortably at their table.

Alan's pondering cut short when Luna leaned over his arm, seemingly unaware of brushing her chest across his arm.

"Are you working on Ancient Runes, Alan?" She asked dreamily. She was still leaning on his arm; that warmth was going straight down. It took him a moment to wake up and fight down the encroaching blush. His hormones had not taken a break, and he coughed before he could speak.

"Yes, I am Luna. Why?" He asked curiously. Beside him, Salvador was snickering. Glaring at him helped lessen his reaction minutely, at least. Luna didn't seem aware of it at all and reached over to point out a sequence. The motion didn't help.

"That's wrong." She stated baldly. Alan looked it over analytically, mind shifting clean into work and blocking out his discomfort.

"Where?" He asked.

Luna turned her head up and he was abruptly reminded of how close they were when she closed the minute distance and put a kiss on his lips. Homework completely fled his mind and he stared blindly before half-closing his eyes to press gently back. There was a tiny teasing touch that he thought might be her tongue and then she pulled back. He stayed frozen for a moment before he could wake back up and,

knowing he already looked like a fool shook his head and frowned playfully at her.

"That was dirty pool, Luna. Now then, you will answer my question."

"But the nargles ..." Luna whined, giving him a wide-eyed look. Alan was grateful the chairs had no arms as he reached over and pulled her off balance and into his lap, flat on her back as he looked down at her. He held her there by the shoulders and smiled.

"No more attending the nargles until you either take back saying that was wrong, or explain why it was wrong. I spent more than half-an-hour trying to figure that one out and you will not tease me over it."

Luna pouted, and then said simply, "Up." Alan let her go, and then raised an eyebrow when she looked back at him. A wave of snickers ran through his group, and Alan ignored them all as Luna leaned against his arm again to point at the question. Alan pointedly moved his arm to rest on her waist – a far less distracting position – and listened carefully to her explaining, ignoring the general amusement in favour of paying attention to Luna.

||||

The beginning of the next week was fairly active. The cause was fairly simple: During Defence Against the Dark Arts, Geoffrey was supervising practice of Expelliarmus in which he had Harry and Neville only shielding as well as practicing as they had finally grasped how to strengthen their spells to match their power levels. Hermione was paired with Averill Runcorn, the only other girl to manage to hold her shield. She wasn't particularly strong, but she'd had some teaching at home and was thus mildly ahead of the others.

In the middle of the practice, Geoffrey suddenly hollered, "Halt!"

All spellcasting stopped abruptly; a few spells went wide and impacted with light noise on the walls, and then everyone looked between Geoffrey and the door, which he was eyeing with distaste. Harry quickly understood: Umbridge was standing there with a small smile.

“Hem hem.”

“You already have the attention of the entire class Ms. Umbridge. I thought I’d put it around that I did not wish to be disrupted this week same as I had not wished to be disrupted last week. May I ask why you have decided to grace us with your presence?” He sounded almost pleasant.

“Well, yes.” She tittered girlishly, and Geoffrey’s face began to look bored. “But I decided it would be most fortuitous to check in on you once more. As I can see, you have them practicing spells. May I ask why?”

“There are several spells I believe are necessary for everyone to know. The disarming spell and the shield spell are those. Each is non-violent, or as non-violent as you can get and have a low ability to cause any serious damage when cast defensively. Offensively, they are not exactly useful or particularly creative. They will stop an attacker from harming you, and then disable them so that no more harm can be done until the aurors arrive. After all, no matter how effective the ministry, aurors cannot be everywhere and some people are unfortunately corrupt in every society.” His tone was bland as milk. Umbridge laughed once more.

“But should they really be practicing on each other?” She asked.
“Surely they don’t —“

“Madam Umbridge, would you be willing to give a demonstration?” She gave him a sour look, and he nodded as though that was exactly as he’d expected. “Well then, some people find it difficult to learn by theory alone; they need aid in figuring out the precise wand movements and inflection required. There is no need to go over any other spells as thoroughly as I will be covering these two, but to protect our future, I would be remiss to not ensure all my students leave with these spells known to them very well.” Harry bit his lip to stop the smile that Geoffrey’s words brought. He was splitting hairs so finely ...

"Very well." Umbridge's frown made it clear she didn't approve, and she smiled. "The class can continue you know. I'll just watch."

"If you wish to watch, you should be out of their way, Ms. Umbridge. I do not wish you to be caught in the possible crossfire. It might muss your hair." He offered. "I need to ensure the perfect safety of my students, and while I don't normally appreciate an unwelcome audience, I do wish to know that you are at least within my vision." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "Auror training leaves one mildly paranoid, I must say, and having someone out of my range of vision leaves me twitchy. And a twitchy American is potentially dangerous. I might overreact."

"You can see me just fine." Umbridge simpered. "I wish to remain up here."

"Yes, I can see you, Madam Umbridge, but your wand arm is not in view and I don't trust you around the students. It's habit. With the students being mine, I protect them as well as I protect myself and I'm sorry to say I don't fully trust you. It's nothing personal. The number of people I'd trust to police a class with me I can list on one hand with space to spare. So, please, either indulge me or leave." He gave her a stare that had no quarter in it. Umbridge bristled, and left abruptly, slamming the door behind her. Geoffrey smiled and turned back to the class. "Continue as you were, please. Does anyone have a question for me? Relating to the lesson, please."

One hand remained up, and Geoffrey called on Seamus.

"Sir, are we really not going to learn other spells this well?" He asked. "Because I don't want to have some half-assed lessons about the rest of them. These are great, but ..." He ended in a hapless shrug.

Geoffrey gave him a small smile. "True, we will not go over other spells quite as thoroughly as these. However, we will spend one or two lessons on each new spell depending on the ease of learning and the relevance the spell has. The difference is that I will not allow one of you to pass this year without knowing the shield spell and the disarming spell perfectly. The other spells will not be required to that degree. There are no worries, though. If you have not quite grasped

the spells by the end of this week, I will have my office open for private tutoring over the rest of this year. For the other spells, I am considering sponsoring a Duelling club. Anyone here interested?" He asked, seemingly disinterested in the response. A flurry of looks were exchanged, and almost every hand in the class went up. It was almost every hand, because Lavender and Parvati were still chatting excitedly to each other, and Sophie wasn't an avid spell-caster. Geoffrey smiled.

"I suspected as much." He offered. "Signs will go up when it's finalized. Now then, back to practicing. I'm still seeing some difficulties from a few of you."

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No sign for the Duelling club went up. Instead, in each Common Room come Wednesday, there was a formal looking document that read,

'By Order of The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts'

Harry didn't want to read more. He turned his back on it and asked Hermione curtly to find out and summarize it for him. Neville joined him in the chairs by the fire and sat down with a dark look. Hermione came over, her mouth pressed into a tight line and perched next to Neville.

"It's disbanding all groups." She said curtly. "None of them are allowed to exist without her permission. I think it's to slap down Professor Alfaerus' idea. But, also," Hermione eyed Harry carefully, "I think it included Quidditch as well."

Harry looked up at her in surprise and then groaned. "Angelina is going to have a conniption."

Neville gave a short laugh, and rocked forward. "More than likely. Think you can keep your temper and not get on her bad side?"

"I dunno." Harry offered. He stood quickly and tipped his head towards the door. There was breakfast to get to. "I reckon so, but

then again, I can't quite change my parents, name, or political stance so my temper may be a moot point." His mouth twisted. "We may have more to worry about from Ron. Hopefully he'll have gotten his act together."

Neville sighed, and looked back into the common room as the portrait swung shut. "Good luck." He offered.

Harry's mouth twisted. Good luck would be something they'd need.

||||

It was a close call to get the Gryffindor Quidditch team reinstated, but it happened the day after the notice went up. It was also immediately spread, from Slytherin no doubt, that Professor Alfaerus was going to be re-evaluated. Whatever it was, Harry found he didn't really care and just sighed and continued on. There was little he could do about that. What he could do, however, was have patience. The Weasley twins had received another 'anonymous' package, and they were now seriously bustling around the tower and no longer were hawking their wares. When pressed, they only said to stay low and wait for the week leading to Halloween.

Angelina threatened violent death if they got expelled before the match, but they promised to not get caught and, after remembering what Harry had said about the Blood Quill, she subsided with a grumble and posted a paper asking for anyone who wanted to get Beater training from Fred and George. Nanna signed on immediately. Practices became hectic and almost nightly when she could manage it, but, while this facilitated training the new reserve, it only highlighted a larger problem.

"Ronald Weasley, get back in the middle hoop!"

Harry looked down from watching Ginny track the snitch and sighed. Angelina was yelling at Ron again. The optimism from when he'd been upped to the proper team had died down in the last few weeks: ever since the Hogsmeade weekend and the Defence class afterwards. His jealousy was now blinding him.

"You've let in four easy goals! Four! I don't know what's gotten into you, but snap out of it and get back in shape! We're playing Slytherin first, Slytherin, and if you're letting in goals like that, we are going to lose!"

Harry pulled out of it, and flew past Ginny to tail the golden snitch over on the far side. Ginny rounded on him and pulled up alongside, muttering irritably about something Harry didn't catch. A glance down showed him a bouncing, fast-moving blur and he paused as he watched Nanna pelt another bludger back at the grinning twins, and then she took out the other and smashed it at Jimmy Peakes, who yelped before beating it back at the other twin. Harry grinned. Peakes had been steadily improving since he found himself paired with the small, black-haired female second year. Apparently stung pride didn't always lead to trouble; Nanna had dared him to try out with her, to see if he'd win. He hadn't, but he'd stubbornly stayed on to learn as he'd done better than the other two hopefuls.

"Hey, Harry!"

Harry looked back up and then smiled weakly. Ginny was holding the struggling snitch, and Harry finally firmed his expression and nodded.

"Well done. Let it go and we'll chase it again. Then I think Angelina's going to make us play catch."

"Lovely." Ginny laughed. "I do want to hone some Chaser skills. It's not like I'll have all that much of a chance to play Seeker with you monopolizing the position. So, are you going to actually keep your attention on the snitch, or are you going to stare vacantly into space once more?"

"Nonsense." Harry returned with a straight face. "I was giving you a chance to catch the snitch, know what it feels like. I can't keep beating you all the time; there's little chance of you going up against someone of my skill on the pitch, after all, so I don't want you to get a mistaken impression of how challenging it really will be."

"And what if I'm up against Prince?" Ginny threw.

'You'd probably win because he let you, since he's got an unfair advantage and he hates the rest of his team' "I'll play anytime it's Prince on the other team. I can promise that."

Ginny gave him a disbelieving look, but Harry just ignored it and scanned for the snitch once more. She didn't persist.

Angelina continued to yell at Ron.

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Monday, the week leading up to Halloween and the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, started out with a repeat of the event against Susan and Hannah two weeks before. This time, as Madam Umbridge strode through the door, the milky white slime dropped upon her head and soaked through her clothes. Coming in behind her, Geoffrey stepped out of the way, and sighed. Harry, at the Gryffindor table, fought down a smile as Umbridge shrieked furiously. Geoffrey shot a cleaning charm at her. As it had with the Hufflepuffs, the slime came off easily in the wake of the spell, but left behind no hair. Umbridge's head was bald and shiny like an egg, without even the subtle stubble Susan and Hannah had been left with, nor eyebrows. Additionally, however, her clothes had had their colour bleached. Her previously baby blue sweater was a spotty off-white where the slime had been. She screamed furiously.

Most of the school fought down the quiet wave of laughter. Gryffindor was failing miserably at doing so. Susan, at the Hufflepuff table smiled brightly, running her hands through her very short hair.

While Hannah had immediately gone to Madam Pomfrey to get her hair regrown, Susan had stubbornly refused, and now wore the short locks with distinct pride. Harry had been surprised she handled it so well, but Susan had taken a moment to explain her suspicions. Harry had been startled she felt it was another girl who was taking it out on her for going out with him. Harry's mind had immediately taken him to Daphne, but he'd said nothing, merely nodding that he felt the same was likely. Susan had then knocked his socks off by asking if he would be willing to taking her out again sometime. He'd had to tell her a maybe – there were no more Hogsmeade weekends for the first

term, and he intended to go home for the Holidays. With the homework so prevalent, those were the only free time he expected to have. Susan agreed, and thanked him before leaving.

The rest of that day had been spent in such a happy cloud, he didn't even respond to Neville's good-natured teasing.

Now, however, he enjoyed the fury Umbridge displayed. There would be plenty more of it to come.

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It was the best week Harry had had in almost the entire time he'd been in Hogwarts. Umbridge went through quite the gauntlet. The twins usually played with her wardrobe, but several times they locked her in her office, and, once, put inside a niffler with a levitation charm on it. Harry had heard that every single china plate had been broken. It left him inordinately pleased.

Even more wonderful, though, was that the twins were never caught. Susan and Hannah had been questioned, but both had been able to completely truthfully say they had nothing to do with it. Hannah related that she had, in turn, ripped into Umbridge to find the culprit for ruining her hair, which left Umbridge supremely confident that they had nothing to do with it. Hannah had then offered to help the twins if they needed it.

Harry and the twins hadn't been able to stop laughing for five minutes afterwards.

The twins had managed to make everyone smile, from most of the houses to the teachers. Madam Pomfrey had actually sent a 'Thank You' card to the twins, as Umbridge had gone to her several times to get fixed up after the twins had done something she couldn't figure out. Madam Pomfrey had taken her sweet time, and used the most foul-tasting potions she could find. Snape had even stopped being unpleasant to any student during that week.

It seemed almost perfect that the crown of that week was the Gryffindor/Slytherin match. Harry was looking forward to the only

public, friendly interaction he could get with his best friend. Ron hadn't improved in his attitude; Angelina was worried about how he would play that day. And Neville, as much as he tried, was still doting on Hermione. At least now, Harry knew that Neville wouldn't have had any contact with him anyways, only being a spectator. It was actually Hermione who had more interest in watching the game than he did. And, last but not least, there was so little Umbridge could do to ruin the game for him, he finally felt free.

Slytherin, though, was doing it's utter best to ruin things, but it wasn't anything new. Alan, of course, had no quarrel with the Gryffindor team, and was more likely to adopt a lofty persona and strut by without acknowledging them at all, but the rest of the team was nowhere near as aloof. Hexes were exchanged, as well as threats and insults. Ron was weathering them with the least skill, easily growing angry and while he wasn't scared in the least, his anger was almost as debilitating. It did not help that being told he was playing to their attempts merely enraged him further. Angelina had rather given up and privately taken Harry aside and told him to catch the snitch if Ron started failing. Harry nodded easily. He never had any trouble with the snitch, although Alan could certainly give him a run for his money in catching it. He would not be willing to fake off to spare Ron's feelings. But Harry was confident in his ability to beat him.

The morning of the match dawned bright and cold. Harry looked out the windows for a moment, and then sighed, grateful that if they were going to be outside, at least he'd be doing something rather than just sitting and freezing. He glanced at Ron's bed, and sighed. He was apparently already up.

Downstairs, Neville and Hermione were talking quietly at the base of the girl's stairs, Neville making a short wand motion and then Hermione gently took his hand to correct him. Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes, and strode over.

"You seen Ron?"

Neville glanced up and smiled tightly. "Why yes, I have. He walked through without looking at anybody with a rather pale complexion.

Angelina ran out after him like a dog on the trail. I'm not really looking forward to seeing what this is going to do to the match."

"Relax." Harry said dryly. "He can't be so bad that I won't be able to save the day with a catch of the snitch."

"Alan has beaten you once." Neville commented. A faint flinch touched one eye, and his smile froze in a way only Harry noticed.

Harry laughed quietly. "Looks like I've gotten to you too."

Neville's grin widened easily. "Yeah, silly habit of yours."

Hermione looked between them and sighed. "Enough, both of you. Harry needs breakfast; it's freezing outside. We'll be cheering for you." Hermione nodded at him.

Harry led the way to the portrait hole and went first. "Well," He pondered. "Who else might you be cheering for at a Gryffindor/Slytherin match?"

Hermione sniffed. "I might cheer for Prince."

"Prince?" Harry looked at her incredulously. She flushed.

"Well, he's a decent boy, a good player, and nowhere near as underhanded as the rest of the Slytherin team. If I had to pick one of them, it would be him."

Harry shook his head. Oh, he was so going to have to share that with Alan. Neville looked a little put off, and then whined,

"Does this mean I've got Slytherin competition?"

Hermione sighed, and turned Neville abruptly to face her, and pulled him into a kiss. Harry kept walking. It was amusing, but it was painful in a strange way. He didn't want to ponder it, and just continued on to breakfast. He walked in, and stopped.

'What the Hell ...'

Luna Lovegood was standing at the Slytherin table, wearing what looked like a life-sized lion hat. She noticed him, waved Alan off, and then strode over quickly and smiled up at Harry.

“Your secret friend says ‘Hi’, and also wanted to know just how easy he should go on you today as you’re having issues with your other friends.”

“Um,” Harry couldn’t think of an answer. Alan would not have told her that they were friends; he wouldn’t have! But … “There’s no need, I can beat him easily enough without him pulling some stop. Just … what’s with the hat?”

Luna smiled brilliantly, “Gryffindor needs more support than Slytherin. Alan does fine without being cheered on, as do you, but Ronald has been looking sickly, so I felt I should give him a boost. Listen,” Luna tapped the hat with her wand, and the lion stretched and roared. The school jumped, and mutters began as Luna giggled quietly. Harry blinked, and then sighed.

“Very well done. Feel free to take the message back to Alan, and get it right, would you?” Harry went to brush past her, and then paused and gave her a small smile. “And thanks. For supporting Ron.”

Luna winked at him and flounced back over to Alan. A glance showed that Alan choked on something as she spoke, and Harry felt a little better. It was just Luna being Luna, then.

His seat at the table was as it had been for the past while. Across from him, Neville and Hermione sat together and chatted about assignments. On his side, it was Nanna, Melanie, Ginny and their friends, all deeply set in discussing their positions as reserves and the coming game. Nanna moaned once more about the twins’ hard regimen, but she was smiling all the while. Harry tried to find the rest of the team; Fred and George were talking intently further up the table with Lee, and down were the Chasers and Ron, sitting almost alone across from Dean and Seamus. He wasn’t eating and he’d probably try even less if Harry reminded him that he should. Feeling his own appetite shrivel, Harry downed another glass of juice and

grabbed a muffin to take with him. Neville saluted him on his way out, and Harry only shortly acknowledged him before focusing on the coming game.

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Alan dressed quickly in the locker room before stepping outside the wait. It was the only difficulty of his position: only one of the other players actually tolerated him. The rest, while not with Draco, were made from the same mould. They all believed the promise of Voldemort. Alan was tolerated because, while he certainly couldn't beat Harry, he could outdo all of the other seekers almost too easily. Most of the team was hoping for a repeat of last year's pick-up game where he did indeed beat Harry to the snitch. If it meant he got to go up against Harry once more without their griping, he wasn't about to tell them it was chance that gave him the catch over Harry, and not skill.

"Get moving, Prince." Montague growled, shouldering out the door and moving to the pitch. Alan waited for the rest of the team to walk out, Crabbe and Goyle eyeing the pitch dully as they obediently followed the Chasers, and then Alan wilfully picked up the rear, coming in last to eye the packed stands. He heard Luna's hat roar, and smiled even as he remembered her words earlier,

"Your secret friend says 'hi' back."

Alan wondered where on earth she'd gleaned that. She didn't know that Alan and Harry were friends; she'd just said it. His friends had eyed her oddly, and Alan had swallowed and just nodded and sceptically accepted with a curious look none of his friends misinterpreted, shaking his head as she left and wondering what on earth he was thinking, to be dating her. It wasn't bad, but ... she was so complicated ...

He was most grateful for the start of the game. Flying certainly gave him something else to do besides chase his thoughts in circles. Alan watched Harry pull up and begin circling, and did the same himself, looking as much at the crowds as for the snitch. He suspected something unpleasant was going to come from the Slytherin stands.

Draco and his had been far too smug recently, and Stephanie had warned him that the seventh year prefect was up to something. Just because he was confident his friends would be fine, didn't make him worry less. Down below, the roar of the crowd was split by Lee Jordan's voice.

"Slytherin score! Bad luck, there, just bad luck. The quaffle goes back to Johnson, who passes to Spinnet and she's dodged a bludger from Crabbe, coming around to shoot on the Slytherin goals – Ohhh."

Alan smiled thinly. No luck at all, apparently. He dropped to avoid a half-hearted bludger from the twins, and then scanned for the snitch once before returning back to listening to the roaring crowd, amidst which seemed to be some singing. Lee apparently noticed as well.

"We've got some of the crowd singing something, what could it be?"

The comment brought a burst of volume from the singers,

Weasley was born in a bin,

He always lets the quaffle in,

Weasley will make sure we win,

Weasley is our king.

Alan paused incredulously. What in the bloody blue blazes was that?

Weasley is our king,

Weasley is our king,

He always lets the quaffle in,

Weasley is out king!

Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring-

The singing cut off abruptly in a frightened squeal. Alan spun to look, and barked a short laugh when he saw the disruption in the Slytherin stands. "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred." He murmured. "Couldn't Draco come up with something a little better than that?"

Lee had returned to commentating loudly and insistently. The song, however gone it now was, had apparently shaken Ron and he let another score through before Warrington screamed,

"Prince, go get the bloody snitch!"

Alan looked immediately for Harry, and sure enough, he was already shooting towards the ground, plunging in a chase of a small, blurred gold spot. Alan shot after him, knowing it was pointless. He was too far away, and if he tried to make a 'straight' shot, he'd compromise himself with the Weasley twins, who both were near bludgers and quite capable of hitting him. He dove, though, in case Harry had bad luck and the snitch changed angles. It did, but it went sidelong and down – away from him. Even a near freefall didn't get him near fast enough. Harry closed his hand over the snitch, and Alan saw Crabbe near a bludger.

"Potter, move your ass!" He shouted.

Harry's head came up, and he shot forward, out of the line of the bludger Crabbe had aimed. Alan had enough time to land before the others lit into him.

"Prince, what the Hell was the big idea? Is Potter more important to you than winning? Some secret boyfriend or something?" Warrington yelled. None of the rest of the team seemed at all disturbed. The keeper ignored him completely. He wasn't willing to fight them; Alan didn't care.

"No, he's not." Alan answered dryly. "I just don't approve of ridiculous underhanded tactics and riding the corruption of the system. If you're so upset, you can always try and see if Draco is better than I am."

"It's tempting." Montague growled.

Alan gave him a sweet smile, and walked back in the direction of the changing rooms. He'd already seen the Gryffindor team gather across the pitch, cheered but subdued with the lacklustre keeping of Ron. Alan was abreast of the stands when Draco filed out. His lower lip was swollen, and his tender walk spoke of a low blow, but he still snarled upon seeing Alan.

"Heard you've got a soft spot for the Gryffindors, Alan."

Alan eyed Draco tiredly. "You use that brain for gossip only, Draco?"

"I've got more skill than you do, Prince!" Draco growled.

"Really?" Alan rolled his eyes. "So it must have been Pansy who thought up that atrocious and childish tune you were singing earlier?"

"Feel jealous of that hovel Ron's got? Gotta be nicer than some uncaring father who lives under a rock." Draco growled.

Alan felt his face cool, and he sibilantly asked, "Better than a father who only sees you as progeny, not a person. You know, that threat is still there. To remove the only thing your father cares about. One of mine certainly already tried. What do you think he'd do if that were ruined, hm? Might he actually sleep with your mother for the second time?"

Draco turned red with rage, and snarled, "Watch your tongue, Prince! You don't know anything!"

Alan rolled his eyes and turned to walk away. Someone cried out behind him, and Alan ducked and rolled away from the expected attack. The spell sailed over his head, and Alan watched it go, feeling his eyes widen at the crater it left on the changing rooms. That would have hurt!

Alan turned back and felt himself not care anymore. He was tired of playing half-assed. Draco didn't know what hit him, first. Alan remembered the sore and frustrating lessons when Geoffrey had first starting teaching him martial arts. He'd only stopped whining after

being shown what learning the discipline would accomplish, when the slim Jannicke had overcome two of Geoffrey's brothers at once.

He'd felt it was truly worth it when Geoffrey had finally talked Velorian and Nicholas into expanding his knowledge with dirty tricks and street fighting.

Now, Draco was on the ground and nursing a broken arm before Alan felt someone grab his shoulder to pull him off. He spun, and stopped when he met Lucille's eyes. Alan pulled out of her grip and leaned onto Draco's throat again, compressing his windpipe and hissing into his ear,

"Keep this in mind next time you want to play chicken, you inbred varmint."

He jumped to his feet before Lucille reached for him again, and stepped willingly back and out of the way of Madam Hooch. Across the stadium, Alan noticed that most of the Gryffindor team was watching them curiously. Alan suppressed a tight smile. Oh, Harry was going to want to know what just happened so badly.

Madam Hooch called him back to the scene. "What got into you, Mr. Prince? Enough of that sordid behaviour; you will go inside immediately and I will send in your Head of House shortly. Get a move on, and no dawdling. Despicable, and uncivilized is what that was; abominable!"

Alan didn't pause to argue, but walked quickly into the castle and down the halls to his father's office, pondering whether it was worth it to stay on the Quidditch team. All of them hated him, and while it was nice to compete against Harry, it was getting tedious. No matter how expected it was, losing all the time was not encouraging.

He got into the office and waited patiently, examining the displays on the walls and trying to think of a potion that used each one, until Severus opened the door and came in with a tight expression.

"Alan, what brought on that ... childish display?"

"I got tired of playing the mouse this year, and Draco offered a good opening to blow off some steam." Alan answered calmly. He then turned to look at Severus and smirked. "Besides, he did start it."

Severus merely raised his eyebrow, and Alan opened his mouth to continue when there was a brisk little knock on the door before it was opened without permission. Severus' face darkened, and Alan straightened, his expression cool. When he saw it was Umbridge, Alan looked down a moment before bringing his face back up. He wasn't playing games with her anymore. Let her think what she liked.

"Hem hem." She began. "Good to see you're here. I was wondering if you might like some extra authority in dealing with the rude display we saw earlier."

"I believe I have the matter in hand, Madam Umbridge." Severus answered tightly. He turned to glare at Alan and sighed. "Alan, two weeks detention and I expect an extra essay each week."

Alan nodded; he'd expected that. It would make it hard for him to do much extracurricular, so it was a fair punishment.

"Hem hem."

Alan hated that sound.

"Yes?" Severus hissed, turning his full glare on Madam Umbridge. Alan schooled his face into being impassive; he did not need to encourage her with any attitude right now.

"I don't believe that's quite fair. He did some serious damage to young Mr. Malfoy, and that temper ... I just don't believe it's quite safe to allow him to remain on the Quidditch team." She smiled saccharinely. Alan felt a twinge of relief inside, and gave her the angry face she expected. "Oh yes," she simpered again, pleased with his anger, "I do believe it just isn't safe. He was raised by those Americans."

"Madam Umbridge, I believe I am his head of house and have authority over his punishment, including the fact that I am also the head of house of Mr. Malfoy."

"Well, you see Professor Snape, that just won't do." She twittered. "I found this troubling earlier as well, when Minerva decided to override me in getting the Gryffindor team reinstated, so I had to bring up this gap to Cornelius. As it stands, I have no more power than the base teacher, but here," she pulled a scroll out of her pocket, and rolled it open. Alan clenched his hands. He didn't like this at all. "Educational Decree Number Twenty-five."

Severus' lips were so tight there was a white line around the edges. Madam Umbridge watched his reactions hungrily.

"The High Inquisitor will now have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions, and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions, and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Signed, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc." She smiled sweetly as she put the paper away. Alan had turned his face into a tight mask, obvious even to her that he was containing his reaction. Severus had gone from angry to blank.

"Well then, I think I should ban Alan Prince from playing Quidditch ever again."

"You only have power over Hogwarts." Alan bit out.

Umbridge smiled. "I'm sure Cornelius would be more than pleased to enforce it elsewhere. You seem most unstable, child, and really, you're a danger. Can't be trusted at all."

The tension in his hands pulled at the scar, and Alan forcibly relaxed his hands, falling into the meek expression to try and keep her at bay.

Once she perceived his surrender, she turned back to smiling at Severus. "I will want his broomstick confiscated, of course, to keep from having any infringement of my ban. I'll keep it in my office, just to

be sure." Severus nodded stiffly, unwilling to press. She smiled in utmost satisfaction. "Well, good afternoon to you, then." She turned and left.

Alan brought his head back up and looked quietly at Severus out of the corner of his eyes. Severus sat back down into his chair, hard, and ground his teeth.

"So, do I still have detention?" Alan asked lightly.

"Why bother?" Severus growled. "The High Inquisitor is satisfied with her punishment. I see no reason to add my own when I don't even have a large grievance with what you did. Mind, I do not approve of you attacking him nor baiting him, but it is not worth this."

Alan shrugged. "I'll have Geoffrey see about getting my broom from her, but if that doesn't work I'll just get him to buy me a new one. It's just a broom, and he's been hawking the prestige of one of the new American brooms." Alan smirked. "Although it's nowhere near as good as the Firebolt, every once in a while he gets patriotic."

Severus nodded slowly. "And the Quidditch team?"

Alan snorted. "I'd been considering dropping out as it was. They don't like me. Let them lose with Draco as seeker." Alan stood quietly and smirked. "I'm going for a walk, then."

Severus nodded shortly and then turned to some of the essays on his desk. Alan left without looking back.

A/N: Next chapter! Thank you everyone for reading, triple thanks for those who reviewed, and please read and review again! I do hope you liked it, lots of promise, stuff, Ron, Umbridge ... and then we come to Christmas! rubs hands together and cackles I have things planned for Christmas! Toodle-pip!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-Five

Harry was similarly disappointed in Alan for striking at Draco, but he didn't say much to his face about it. It was Alan's choice, and it's not like Draco didn't deserve it. Harry just wished that Draco would stop playing up everyone else's expectations, rather than being his own person. Alan's irritation with him had little to do with it.

Harry's worries were also sidelined by the return of Hagrid. Upon Hermione noticing him being back, Harry immediately took a trip down, and Ron, out of concern, finally rejoined them to go and talk to him.

Harry was startled that Hagrid had been sent to the giants, but unsurprised that he had been asked. It was disquieting to have him still injured, but he knew whatever he was up to ... Dumbledore wouldn't let him do anything too dangerous, would he?

Either way, Harry knew he wouldn't be able to talk much in the way of sense into Hagrid. It certainly hadn't worked anytime before. Come Tuesday, Harry was resigned to whatever Hagrid would bring. So long as he listened and obeyed Hagrid's rules, and let Hagrid do most of the contact, everything should be perfectly fine.

Should be.

Harry struggled through the snow with Hermione and Ron to Hagrid's hut on Tuesday and eyed the carcass Hagrid had with him warily. Several types of large animals were attracted to fresh meat, and Harry wouldn't run any of them past Hagrid to acquire. The Slytherins appeared similarly taken aback. Draco appeared frightened, and Harry sighed. If the idiot would only face the facts ...

"We're working in here today!" Hagrid called, jerking his head towards the forest. "Bit more sheltered, and anyways, they prefer the dark."

Harry sighed and smiled. Whatever it was, he was looking forward to it.

"What prefers the dark?" Draco cried sharply, eyeing his bookends and staring fearfully into the forest. "What did he say prefers the dark? Did you hear?"

Harry shook his head once more. Draco hadn't liked the forest first year either.

"Ready?" Hagrid boomed. "I've bin savin' a trip inter the forest fer yer fifth year. Thought we'd go an' see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what we're studying today is pretty rare. I reckon I'm probably the on'y person in Britain who's managed ter train 'em ..."

"And you're sure they're trained, are you?" Malfoy panicked. "Only it wouldn't be the first time you've brought wild stuff to class, would it?"

Several members of the class murmured agreement, Slytherin and Gryffindor both. Alan studied his nails, and drawled,

"Malfoy, quit whimpering. It's your own stupidity that's gotten you attacked before so if you could just rein that in, you'd be fine. Honestly, in this case Hagrid is a bit more informed than you are."

Malfoy's face flushed with shame and anger, and he glared at Alan. Alan just smiled quietly without any real expression.

Hagrid, however, nodded. "Course they're trained. I said, I trained them myself and they haven't gotten out of hand ever." He hoisted the cow a higher on his shoulder.

"What happened to your face then?" Draco snapped.

"Mind yer own business." Hagrid growled. "Now if yeh've finished askin' stupid questions, follow me."

He turned and strode straight into the forest. Harry and Alan traded short looks across the gathered students, none of whom seemed interested in following him anytime soon, and shook their heads. Harry waved Hermione and Ron to follow him and walked forward, Alan walking confidently a few steps ahead. Blaise irritably slogged after him, followed by the rest of his coterie. Harry noted with

amusement that Blaise shot him an irritated look before catching up with Alan – and distinctly standing to his right. Harry had to choke down a laugh.

It was ten minutes before Hagrid stopped deep in the forest, with the branches overhead keeping the ground clear, and the light down to that of twilight. Hagrid dropped the dead meat, and stepped back to watch the class approach, most of who were doing so most cautiously. Alan and Harry, and their friends were the only ones watching with easy curiosity, and were not overly concerned.

“Gather roun’, gather roun’” Hagrid encouraged. “Now, they’ll be attracted ter the smell o’ the meat, but I’m goin’ ter give ‘em a call anyway, ‘cause they’ll like ter know it’s me.”

Hagrid shook his hair out and then gave an odd shrieking cry that echoed through the trees like the call of some monstrous bird. Nobody laughed; most of them were too scared to make a sound, and Blaise, the only person Harry thought might amongst their groups, looked curious and not scornful.

Hagrid gave the shrieking cry again. The class began to shuffle restlessly, looking nervously around for whatever might be coming through the trees. Draco was pressed tightly against Crabbe and Goyle, looking around in fear. Hagrid shook his hair back to cry again, and Harry still saw nothing, but he heard a soft ‘Oh,’ from to his right, and he looked and found Alan staring into the trees, his mouth softening into a wry smile. Harry looked around and saw nothing. Puzzled he returned his attention to the centre, where Hagrid was standing looking pleased, and where the cow carcass was shuddering slightly. Startled, Harry eyed the ground, the carcass and froze.

Meat was being pulled and torn off on the far side. It ripped, and then disappeared. Disturbed, Harry stepped back a moment, completely puzzled.

“Why doesn’t he call again?” Ron asked.

Harry knew; whatever it was, it was already here and Alan either noticed the torn meat before Harry did or ... or he could see it.

"Ah, here comes another one!" Hagrid announced, pleased. "Now, put up your hands. Who can see 'em?"

Harry looked over and Alan negligently raised his hand, followed by Theodore who did so only reluctantly. Harry felt a suspicion form.

"Ah, yes." Hagrid nodded, satisfied.

"Excuse me," Draco sneered, "but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?"

In answer, Hagrid pointed to the meat that Harry had already seen ripping away. It took a few moments before the rest of the class saw it, and Parvati squealed.

"What is it? What's eating it?"

"Thestrals." Hagrid announced proudly. Hermione squeaked in understanding and Harry smiled. Ron looked more closely at the space around the carcass, but Harry knew he'd see nothing. "Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em in here. Now, who knows - ?"

"But they're really, really unlucky!" Interrupted Parvati, looking alarmed. Harry rolled his eyes. "They're supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once – "

"No, no, no." Hagrid chuckled. "Tha's jus' superstition, that is, they aren't unlucky, they're dead clever and useful." Alan snorted; Harry bit down a smile. "Course, this lot don't get a lot of work, it's mainly jus' pullin' the school carriages unless Dumbledore's takin' a long journey and don't want ter apparate. An' here's another couple, look."

Harry sighed, wishing he could see the lesson object, and then stared when Alan walked over and gently stroked his hand down something only he could see. Parvati, across from him, squealed and backed away. Alan chuckled, as did Hagrid.

"I see ye know thestrals some, Alan." Hagrid commented.

"One of my teachers in Salem kept a few." Alan commented. "I've seen them since I was young, and his were a little bad-tempered – much like him. But they liked me well enough."

Hagrid nodded understandingly, and then asked, "Thestrals won't bite ye unless you really annoy 'em. Now, who can tell me why some o' you can see them an' some can't?"

Hermione raised her hand before anyone else. She was overflowing with enthusiasm, and Hagrid chuckled as he called on her.

"The only people who can see thestrals are people who have seen death."

"Exactly right!" Hagrid said. "Take ten points ter Gryffindor."

"Hem hem."

Harry stiffened, and saw Alan do the same. Blaise immediately turned to eye the source, and Harry glared irritably. She was dressed in green, accentuating her toad look, and smiling in her frustrating way at Hagrid. Harry stepped unconsciously away from her, and wished she would disappear. Hagrid, however, was eyeing the space near him, which Harry presumed was a thestral, possibly thinking it had made the strange little cough.

"Hem hem."

"Oh hello!" Hagrid beamed, locating the green toad.

"You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?" Umbridge asked in a loud, slow voice, as though addressing someone foreign and slow. She'd used it before on him, when she'd bearded him upon his return while Harry and his friends hid under the invisibility cloak. That had been most uncomfortable. "Telling you I would be inspecting your lesson?"

"Oh, yeah." Hagrid said brightly. "Glad you found the place all right! As you can see, or – well I dunno, can you? – We're doing thestrals today –"

"I'm sorry?" Umbridge asked loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. "What did you say?"

Hagrid turned confused.

"Er, - thestrals." He said loudly. "Big, er, winged horses, you know?" He flapped his gigantic arms hopefully.

Madam Umbridge raised her eyebrows at him and pursed her lips, muttering to herself as she made a note on her clipboard, "has ...to ... resort ...to ...crude ...sign-language."

"Well, anyway," Hagrid turned back to the lesson, looking slightly flustered. "Erm ... what was I saying?"

"Appears ... to ...have ...bad ...short-term ...memory." Umbridge once again muttered loud enough for the class to hear while writing on her clipboard. Draco was looking like he'd been handed a present, but Hermione was giving a valiant impression of an angry McGonagall. Alan was watching Umbridge with a tight look Harry felt did not bode well for her.

"Oh, yeah." Hagrid threw an uneasy glance at Umbridge's clipboard, but ploughed on valiantly. "Yeah, I was gonna tell you how we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male and five females. This one," He patted the space above where Harry had first noticed the disappearing meat, "name o' Tenebrus. He's my special favourite, first one born in the forest –"

"Are you aware," Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, "that the ministry has classified thestrals as 'dangerous'?"

Hagrid merely chuckled.

"Thestrals aren't dangerous! All righ', they might take a bite out of you if yeh really annoy them –"

"Shows ... signs ...of ...pleasure ...at ...idea ...of ...violence ..." Umbridge scribbled again upon her clipboard.

"No – come on!" Hagrid jolted. He was anxious now. "I mean, a dog'll bite if yeh bait it, won't it? Thestrals have just got a bad reputation because o' the death thing. People used to think they were bad omens, didn' they? Jus' didn' understand, did they?"

Umbridge looked up as she finished writing and didn't respond. She spoke, loudly and slowly once more, "Please continue teaching as usual. I'm going to walk," She mimed walking. Pansy and Draco were having fits of silent laughter. Harry feared the look on Tracey's face as she watched them, "among the students," she pointed at the children around the class, "and ask them questions." She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking.

Hagrid was staring at her, clearly at a loss to see why she was acting like he didn't understand English. Alan spoke in an offhand to Blaise that everyone heard, "What did she get into since yesterday that fried her brain?"

Blaise returned quietly, "I don't know. She couldn't seem to hear Geoffrey half the time yesterday either. Maybe she got pranked again? Can't seem to help it, can she?"

"Isn't there a ward in St. Mungos for that? Permanent spell damage?" Alan mused quietly. Umbridge somehow didn't seem to notice their talking, but Draco and Pansy looked furious, and Hagrid watched them muse with a bit of relief.

Umbridge moved amongst the students and Harry saw Alan wave his right hand shortly. Harry shortly understood; Alan wore his wand in a wrist sheath, and thus could use it very effectively, and very discretely. They must have spelled her to not hear their little banter.

Hermione was fuming silently, but could do nothing as Umbridge moved over to speak to Pansy Parkinson; Alan's quip had only mildly assuaged her anger. Hagrid struggled back into his planned lesson.

"Erm, anyways ... Thestrals." Hagrid said firmly. "Yeah, there's loads of good abou' them."

"Do you find," Umbridge asked in a ringing voice. "That you are able to understand Hagrid when he talks?"

Pansy pulled her anger at Alan in, and answered with a lilt of giggling to the words, "No, because ... well, it sounds a lot ... like grunting most of the time."

Umbridge scribbled onto her clipboard again. Hagrid struggled to ignore the answer Pansy had given. Blaise spoke up again, in the stage whisper, sounding worried, "I think the hearing difficulty is spreading, Alan." Somehow it seemed to help Hagrid. "Are you sure we won't catch it?" Alan's glare back said he was being ridiculous, but his eyes smiled.

"One really good thing about thestrals is that once yeh tame them, you'll never be lost again. 'Mazin' senses o' direction, jus' tell 'em where ye want ter go –"

"Assuming they can understand you, of course." Malfoy interjected loudly. Those around him fell into giggles, and Alan tossed in,

"That's not usually a problem. As creatures, language isn't much of a barrier, and thestrals have few ear problems." He wasn't even looking at Draco, instead simply studying his nails and stroking the invisible horse next to him like it was a dog.

Umbridge gave Alan a tight look and turned to address Theodore.

"Theodore Nott? You can see the thestrals, correct?" She asked sweetly.

Theodore eyed her with distaste, but quietly answered affirmatively.

"Whom did you see die?"

Theodore huffed. "I don't see how that's your business."

Umbridge bit back a retort, and smiled saccharinely again.

"And what do you think of them?" She waved negligently to the carcass, which was nearly nothing more than bone now.

"I think they're hideous," He sneered. Umbridge looked pleased for a moment, and then Theodore continued, "but then again, a lot of things are." Before she could react, he smiled warmly and added, "But, ugly or not, thestrals are indeed useful and highly intelligent. You can't deny that."

Umbridge straightened abruptly and turned back to Hagrid. "Well Hagrid." She'd returned to her loud, slow voice. Theodore mouthed something that couldn't have been polite behind her back. "I think I've got enough to be getting along with. You will receive," she mimed pulling something from the air, "the results of your inspection," she pointed at the clipboard, "in ten days time." She held up ten stubby little fingers, and then smiled, self-satisfied. She looked ever more like a toad then ever, and hustled out of their midst, leaving behind a grimly pleased Draco and Pansy, giggling madly. Alan watched her go with a gaze Harry never wanted aimed at his back.

"It's all right, Hagrid." Alan finally said. "I think she's got a bit of a mental problem, but nobody's ever had it checked out. She just doesn't hear things sometimes, so she's got this thing of compensating for it. How are the thestrals in their natural habitat? They seem different than the ones Amaranth trained, but I'm not sure why."

Alan's question seemed to relax Hagrid, and he moved back into the lesson with only a little unease, ignoring the furious looks Draco and Pansy wore in favour of answering the honest question about his animals.

||||

December rolled in amidst snow and homework. Harry and Ron, who, while not speaking to them, still stayed nearby once more, were struggling to move through the copious assignments. Neville and Hermione, prefects, were hardly spending any time in menial pursuits.

The amount of homework, while manageable, took up what time was not taken with prefect duties of supervising younger students and managing the castle. Neither complained too much; Harry suspected it was because most duties were done with both of them working together. He didn't usually dwell on that, though, as it tended to lead to that vague pain that had arisen with them becoming a couple. It appeared Ron had noticed the lost look on his face at one point, and had returned to being marginally friendlier to Harry than to Neville. Harry didn't argue the point.

Aside from their activities, Harry knew that Alan had taken up his own. Their library meetings had grown few, and neither was all that eager to devote another weekend to the Chamber. Harry had heard from Melanie and Ginny that they were joining them to study in the library most weeks, which told Harry where Alan's time had gone. Apparently Luna and him were also getting together. But Neville had passed several messages on from Blaise that told him that Alan missed him as much as he missed Alan.

Still, though, Harry looked forward to going home for Christmas once more. Despite the worries about his friends, he was more worried about his parents. The Sunday before term ended was tense and painful: Ten Death Eaters had escaped from Azkaban. Neville hadn't spoken during the entire day. Among them had been the Lestranges, who Harry knew, had at one point targeted and tortured his family. While they were all aurors, and Lily an excellent duellist, worry would leave neither him nor Neville alone.

Honestly, Christmas would probably be a good break for all of them.

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Sitting in the library and waiting for the week to end, Alan brushed his quill across Luna's hand once more, smiling tightly. Luna didn't seem to notice, but her long, flowing quill twitched sideways and the tip brushed across his nose where he'd been leaning down to try and read. Alan sneezed, and his friends around him laughed.

"Alan, you're more hopeless than Salvador." Lucille announced. She was currently sitting in the black boy's lap, her arm over his shoulders

and her pale skin and hair looking dramatically out of place against his dark colouring.

“Am I?” Alan asked blandly. “Luna, am I hopeless?”

“No, you’re actually a surprising blend of optimistic and pessimistic.” She answered seriously. “You always insist that things could be worse, so be grateful they aren’t.”

Alan blinked, and then snorted again. He reached over to pull her against his side and leaned his forehead into her hair. “Luna, what am I going to do with you?”

“Hmmm, maybe be completely distracted to the point of losing your head?” She answered, but she sounded minutely breathless.

“But what a way to go.” Salvador added. “Losing your head over a woman isn’t the most painful thing I can imagine.”

“That’s cause you’re thick, Salvador.” Stephanie interjected. “And you’re still not getting that answer right. Snape should have told you that rather than following the book, you need to stir it one more time anti-clockwise and it’ll congeal several times faster.”

Salvador leaned around Lucille to stare at the offending essay he was trying to finish and hissed. “Where do you pull this from?”

“I happen to remember things well. Correct it if you want to get a decent score. Snape doesn’t like it when you don’t remember what he tells you, especially if you’re going for your NEWT.”

“I’m only in the class because my mother insisted I take every main class I qualified for. Damn woman didn’t even let me opt out of History, which is even more boring than the rest. I only passed the damn OWL because of Lucille giving me her notes.” Salvador growled darkly as he quickly erased several lines of text and rewrote them in neatly, so much so that Alan couldn’t tell he’d erased it before.

“How’d you do that?” Alan asked.

"Subtle writing changes. Make the letters minutely smaller and thinner, and it's almost indistinguishable so long as what you plan on writing in is nearly the same size as what you took out, hence the several lines of text rather than just the one that needed editing. You'll catch on once you have to do a few more of these essays."

"Huh." Alan quipped. "Well, I never redo my essays, so I guess I never bothered to figure it out."

"Do you do any editing?" Stephanie demanded.

Alan eyed her cautiously. "No, not really, just checking spelling on occasion ..."

"Lemme see your essays." She ordered. Mutely Alan handed them over for her perusal. Luna leaned back against him and hummed an indeterminate tune. Alan let himself be distracted and ran his fingers through her hair, relaxing completely. He jumped shortly when Stephanie snorted and slapped the papers down.

"You smart people disgust me. You looked like you were asleep, Prince."

Alan began to argue, and then had to stop as he split into a yawn. Laughter passed over the table, and Ginny, sitting once more between Blaise and Melanie, stood.

"It is actually getting close to curfew. Me, Luna and Melanie should be back at our dorms."

A murmur of agreement found its way around the table, and everyone packed up, walking back down the halls to the Slytherin dorms. There, Salvador immediately took over the armchair once more, Lucille sitting cross-legged in front. Dillan curled up on the end of the couch, across from Stephanie as Blaise and Theodore took the other, arguing through the Transfiguration homework. Alan considered joining them to help, but he found himself yawning again and left to his room, slipping to bed early. He hadn't felt tired like this in a long time; he was beginning to get a headache as well, but then again, he did forget lunch earlier, and hadn't had much supper.

He slipped into sleep feeling like he was forgetting something important.

Alan fell from darkness into a scattered dream of no light, and sensation. Muscle bunched in a place it was not ... everything was dark, beyond the lack of knowledge ... something needed to be done, there were orders to follow, an overwhelming desire to pass that door, but something ...

Alan bolted upright, and coughed, trying to get the taste of blood off his tongue. How the Hell had he managed to bite himself in his sleep? He thought he'd stopped doing that! He stumbled into the bathroom, and the lights came up, dim as they tended to be when it was the middle of the night. Alan scowled and they brightened to normal. Quickly, he checked his mouth, but found no blood, no soreness, nothing. But the taste still felt warm and tacky, he could feel it like it was his own fangs ...

Alan froze, and then noticed something his sleep-addled mind hadn't picked up on yet, although how he'd missed it was beyond him. His right eye wasn't blind, but across the pupil was a faint outline of a scar, and the door to the shower was faintly blurry. That didn't happen unless he was weak, but he felt fine, perfect, completely uninjured. How was his eye acting up?

A dull throb dragged his attention back to his body, a headache arcing out from his eyes and back. Alan closed his eyes and tried to isolate it, but when he did so he swore at the ridiculous solution. His occlumency had been completely scattered. For the past three weeks, he'd been forgetting to reinforce it, distracted by school, homework, his friends, and Luna. The girl had told him he was losing his head, but he hadn't thought she'd meant this.

Logic said she probably hadn't meant anything beyond the pure words, but it was so stupid of him to have forgotten. It was ridiculous.

Alan glared at his reflection once more, and stared at the white, twisted tissue bisecting his pupil, wishing it would go away. Alan

closed his eyes - and tasted blood and disappointment; the man had made it impossible, the meddlesome fool's dog ...

Alan stepped back with a hiss, and stalked back for his dressing gown. He was unlikely to get more sleep, and ... his movement paused. Someone had been bitten by Voldemort ... or whatever Voldemort was working through right then, and likely they had been one of Dumbledore's men ... his father had mentioned guard duty, and Alan hadn't seen him all day ...

Alan tore out of the room as he hurriedly finished getting the dressing gown on, through the deserted common room and into the halls, to his father's rooms. Alan burst in, and went to his room. He was met with a flaring wandlight, and jolted back, feeling immense relief. His father was fine, and safe, but whoever had been there was not. He needed someone to save them, now. He couldn't let them die, not if he could help it.

"Alan, what in the blazes are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

"Dad, I messed up my Occlumency and got a dream. Someone got attacked by a —a servant, serpent of Voldemort's. I think it was whoever was on guard duty. Someone needs to go after them, or check on them. Something. Please?"

Severus watched him warily for a long moment, and then slipped back into his room, asking him to wait. It wasn't long before they were hurrying up to the upper floors, and the Headmaster's office. Severus got them in, and the babble hiding behind the doors halted.

"Ah, Professor Snape. What is it?" Dumbledore greeting as Severus ushered him in first.

"Alan's Occlumency has apparently suffered due to his distraction with school, but he tells me he strongly suspects that whomever is on guard duty has been attacked by some serpent of Voldemort's." Severus growled out. Alan winced; Severus had never been at his best at early hours of the morning, and waking him had not done his temper any favours.

Dumbledore shot Alan a worried look and then stared. Alan felt like cursing. His Occlumency was resisting his attempts to repair it, and apparently without it up at full power his glamour wasn't working right, and with it unconscious, he couldn't fix it. He couldn't see anything clearly beyond Dumbledore's chair, and so the Headmaster was getting a great look at the thin, knotted scar across his eye.

"Marked ..." Dumbledore whispered. He turned away and Alan was grateful. As Dumbledore had looked at him, the taste of blood had returned to his mouth and his vision had wavered. Abruptly, the sensation cut off, and Alan staggered in his father's grasp. Severus looked down at him in concern, but Alan brushed it off as Dumbledore addressed the portraits.

"Everard, Dilys!" Two portraits woke, a sallow-faced black-haired man, and a witch with long silver ringlets. "You were listening?" He barely waited for the acknowledgement. "The man that is likely injured has red hair and glasses. Everard, raise the alarm and make sure the right people find him."

He waved them off, and they slipped out of their portraits, disappearing completely. Dumbledore turned back to Severus and Alan and waved at the space before his desk. Irritably, Severus conjured two simple wooden chairs, and both sat, Alan cautiously. He'd never liked Dumbledore ...

"What, exactly, made you so sure of your vision, Alan?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"I woke up tasting blood." Alan answered baldly. "I immediately went to the bathroom to check. My nightmares haven't been pleasant, and I have several times bitten my cheek or tongue while sleeping, but I found no injury. The taste was overwhelming. The small threads of the dream kept wandering through my mind, seemingly out of place and certainly out of context. I got concerned and remembering the guard duty Severus had mentioned, I went to go check on him. When he was fine, I knew it must've been someone else, and you should be informed to go help them."

"Have you ever had any other visions?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, but Geoffrey was certain they were possible. Koreol as well." Alan returned. "That's why he had me learn Occlumency. I don't doubt them. If I'm wrong, then perhaps one of your birds will be in trouble for no reason, but if I'm not wrong, I don't want this on my conscience."

"A wise choice." Dumbledore nodded slowly and gave Alan a cautious smile. "Thank you for coming to me with this."

"Dumbledore!" The dark-haired wizard had returned. Dumbledore turned away to check with him, and Alan awkwardly leaned against Severus, wanting security. Severus was stiff for a long moment before he raised his arm to allow Alan to lean against his side.

"I yelled until someone came running." The portrait continued. "Said I'd heard something dodgy downstairs. They didn't know what to believe, but went to check anyways. Came back up with him a few minutes later, covered in blood he was. I ran to Elfrida Clagg's portrait to get a good view as he left ..."

"Well done. Dilys will have seen him arrive, then."

Sure enough, a few minutes later the silver-haired witch returned and slumped into her armchair. "He's in St. Mungos, Dumbledore. They carried him past my portrait. He looks bad ..."

Alan felt his stomach tighten, but forced himself to relax. He'd done all he could. They'd either save him, or they wouldn't. It was out of his hands, and he was feeling tired again. Dumbledore apparently noticed and smiled warmly.

"I think everything is taken care of that you can help with, Alan. Thank you for bringing this to me." He sounded strangely relieved, as though the action meant more than itself. "I believe it would be best for you to return to sleep, if you can. Good night, to both of you."

Severus nodded carefully and jostled Alan into sitting up. Alan indignantly thought that he hadn't fallen asleep on him, and stood, rubbing his eyes.

"What of the Weasley children, Dumbledore?" Severus asked curtly.
"Will you inform them?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I will be sending Fawkes to Mrs. Weasley right after you leave, and will leave it to her to inform her children. Madam Umbridge is keeping a watch on the communication to and from the school, so it is best if there is no hint of Alan receiving visions ..." He sent a stare at Alan's face once more, and Alan fought the desire to swear. He needed to get his Occlumency back up.

Severus nodded, and took Alan's shoulder to lead him out, walking briskly downstairs to his office once more, asking only one question, "Will you wish to remain in my quarters tonight, Alan?"

Alan's only answer was a tired nod. He hoped like Hell he wasn't going to get another vision. The last one was useful. He did not want to live through Voldemort getting pissed off and torturing someone.

He fell asleep as soon as he reached his rooms in Severus' quarters. Blessedly, he did not dream again.

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Everyone else woke oblivious to the concerns of the night before. Harry, Neville, Ron and Hermione were enjoying a strained camaraderie at breakfast, alongside Ginny, Melanie and Nanna. It was the twins who got the letter, and became quickly solemn, darting worried glances at the Head Table until breakfast finished, and the teachers – and Dumbledore – left. They immediately stood and walked up behind Harry and Ron.

"Ron, you need to come with us. Something happened last night, and we need to go see Dumbledore. Ginny, c'mon." Fred asked quietly.

A look at his face and neither Ron nor Ginny argued, paling quickly and abandoning their breakfasts. Harry and Neville exchanged worried looks.

"You've heard nothing?" Neville asked.

"Not a thing." Harry returned, watching the Weasleys leave. "But apparently something happened, to get Fred and George that solemn. I hope ..."

"It can't have been too bad." Neville rationalized. "They didn't look like someone died."

"It must've come damn close." Harry growled. Reflexively, Harry looked across the hall at the Slytherin table, but it was mostly empty now, the students dispersing to their own agendas. Harry licked his lips and stood. "I'm heading off."

Neville merely nodded, and returned to picking at the remnants of his food, unheeding of Hermione's worried looks. He'd not been the most social since the mass escape earlier that week, and Hermione was bearing the brunt of it. She managed well, though, and Harry felt appreciative of her patience – and a bit vindicated. Neville was ignoring her much as he had ignored Harry in the weeks previous and, interestingly enough, Neville had begun to work with Harry more often as well, drifting back to his 'brother'.

His walking took him to the library, and to the far corner he'd run into Alan in years previous. It was empty at the moment, and Harry was too restless to sit. He browsed the books, running through each quickly and inefficiently, before someone stepped up beside him. Harry looked over, and smiled weakly at Alan.

"Why do you always seem to find me when I'm here?"

"Blaise noticed you come in while he was looking for a book for homework. We've taken to sitting at the table a few rows over. When he saw you heading back here, he came back and slid me a note. I thought you'd probably want to know what had happened with the Weasleys, anyways."

Harry closed the book he held and turned to Alan. "How do you know what happened?"

"To quote Geoffrey, 'nothing destroys Occlumency shields better than teenaged hormones.'" Alan laughed bitterly. "Between my friends, homework, and Luna, my shields degraded and last night I got to see that Koreol was right in saying that without defences, I would get visions. I got one, disjointed, and woke up tasting blood without having bitten myself. I told Severus, who told Dumbledore, who sent someone to get Arthur before he could bleed to death. Chances are, the Weasleys just got a letter from their mother about it. It'll leave less for Umbridge to question, if they hear it from a letter."

Harry was silent for a long moment, digesting it. "I gather your shields are better now?"

Alan snorted. "They have to be. If they're not up, my glamour falls. I happen to be rather fond of binocular vision, thank you."

Harry laughed quietly. Trust Alan to find the humour.

"Thank you."

"It was an accident." Alan said dismissively. "I had just as much chance to see him torturing someone as save someone's life."

"Still." Harry looked up at Alan firmly. "Thank you."

"Ron's been an ass for the past few weeks. Why are you so grateful?"

"Because, just because my friend is growing up is no reason to be irritated with him."

Alan snorted. "Optimist."

"Sarcastic." Harry returned.

Alan smiled ironically. "And would you like to join us for studying? Neville's welcome to come as well. I'm sure Blaise would love to start debating answers with your brother and his belle."

Harry flinched, and Alan shook his head before walking away. It was a long moment of consideration before Harry caved. He wanted to tell

his father off ... but his memories of second year vividly invaded his mind, of fear and rejection ... any good mood he had was gone as he angrily left the library, alone and without stopping.

Harry sulked for most of the rest of the day, returning to his room and double-checking that everything was packed before he sat down and read, not responding with much more than a grunt when Neville came in. Fortunately, Neville wore the temper easily and simply told him that the Weasleys had left school already and that as far as he knew everything was going to be fine. Harry couldn't even find it in him to tell him what Alan had said.

The next morning was a mess of leaving by the train, and Harry would have told Neville Alan's news save for the prefect duties and Melanie and Nanna joining them in the compartment, missing Ginny. Luna came in as well, and, immediately upon seeing Harry, she smiled idly and commented in her airy voice,

"You really need to get over yourself, you know. Putting it off won't hurt for now, but soon enough there won't be any excuses."

Harry looked up at her in surprise and felt his face tighten. "Luna, how does Alan put up with you?"

Luna's smile widened. "He just listens and answers and moves on with or without paying any attention at all. He knows himself well enough to ignore me if he so desires."

Harry huffed. "I suppose that's fair enough."

Luna settled down easily and engaged Melanie and Nanna in a game of exploding snap as they road the train to the end. Susan dropped by, but quailed at the sight of Nanna, only managing a weak, "Happy Christmas" before she fled, blushing. Neville and Hermione were in and out, and Harry was surprised when Dillan, whom he knew only passingly as Alan's friend, stuck his head in to check on the girls with a short, irritable glare for Harry. Between it all, Harry was glad to get to the station, where he quickly hauled his luggage out to his parents. He was not pleased to hear that they would be stopping off at Headquarters for the first few days.

"Why are we going there? We have enough wards on our house to be fine; it held up during the last war!" Harry whined. He was tired, angry with himself and his father, and feeling betrayed by Alan. He did not want to deal with all of this!

"Harry, we need to make sure everything is in order, and check in with everyone else. You will stop whining this instant; you're fifteen years old not five!" Lily scolded. Harry sullenly shut up, staring angrily at the ground in front of him. "We're picking up Neville and Melanie for Alice and Frank as well, so hop to it. And I will not hear a word of complaint for when Prince tags along; his guardians couldn't spare time to pick him up."

Harry felt himself struggling to control his desire to react, even as he felt hopelessly confused about what to feel for it. He was happy to be with Alan, but confused and stressed about how to act with his refusal hanging between them.

Neville came over with a small smile, and then paused when he saw Alan come over as well. Alan spared both of them a short glance, and turned to smile at Lily. "Thank you for picking me up, Mrs. Potter. Good evening, Melanie."

Melanie twitched slightly, and murmured a greeting in turn before hiding behind Neville. She must feel awkward being the only one openly friends with him. Harry wondered how Alan felt in the reverse, only able to openly address one out of three. Lily sighed as she ushered all of them out of the station and to the cars that would take them to Grimmauld. It was a short trip.

It was an unexpected welcome when they arrived.

Lily rang the doorbell and Harry jumped as noise rebounded within for long moments before the door opened. Harry had the wild thought that Mrs. Black's portrait was still in there, but he knew it wasn't. His mother didn't look concerned, so what, then, was causing all that noise?

A/N: Beginning of Christmas, and the trip to the next half of fifth year where everything will happen. Or go to Hell, depending on your POV. Thank you to everyone who's read, reviewed, and favourited; I hope you enjoy it! Two weeks, then. grins Although next week will be another short of things happening previous to the story time - Salem, in fact, for those who are curious. See you all! Thank you for reading!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-Six

Regulus opened the door and gave a strained smile.

"Come in, would you? Excuse the noise, it's just Ginger's children acting up. Chris doesn't want to share a room with Sean and Adam; the younger twins are screaming in sympathy, and Vivica is feeling ignored."

From up the stairs, came the sound of running, and then a pale blonde youth came down to find the door open. Alan immediately brightened, and Harry fought down an ironic smile.

"Andrew!" Alan called happily. "What the Hell are you doing here?"

Andrew strolled across the entrance hall and shrugged smoothly. "Felt like visiting my dearest friend, is all. Need a hand?"

"Trunk's still shrunk. Mrs. Potter's good with charms. And the tantrums?" Alan asked, cautiously.

Andrew shrugged, and lost his smile. "They're seven, four, and two. Plus siblings. It was easier dealing with Quinton at home, but Ginger's attached to her kids."

Harry felt his reluctance return four-fold. He did not want to deal with a bunch of little brats. However, his mother had led the way in behind Alan, and so Harry grudgingly followed. Once inside, he was quite surprised to find it thoroughly clean, and looking a lot brighter than he had thought possible. It was a pleasant change. As everyone entered, Lily turned to smile at Regulus.

"Does Ginger need any help?"

Regulus smiled wryly. "Has she ever accepted any when she didn't have to? She's got Geoffrey up there helping out. The meeting is waiting for Severus to arrive, so he's free at the moment. Otherwise I'd be the one getting hauled about, and Doe would've answered the door."

Alan looked up, and turned back to Andrew to ask, “You came with Ginger’s twins?”

“Course. Why waste the trip? Koreol hasn’t liked my dad coming over here since the last war. Now that he’s back,” Harry was idly surprised Andrew didn’t say his name outright, “he hasn’t let him come without being a silent shadow. Since they needed to apparate here anyways, I just asked to come along. Koreol will be back to take them home after Velorian goes, which should be within the week. Wouldn’t want to offend by staying too long into the season.” Andrew finished primly.

Shortly after he finished, Harry noticed that the noise from upstairs had finally died down, and then a blonde woman came down with a bright smile on her face, a redheaded toddler balanced on her hip.

“Ah, hello Lily, children. I recognise Harry’s eyes easily enough, but the others ...”

Lily smiled. “Ginger, the black-haired girl is Nanna, my daughter, and Neville is there,” She waved at him and Neville gave a short bow, “and his sister is behind him.”

“Lovely to meet you all.” Ginger chirped. “The ruckus is dealt with, and I’ll just show you to your rooms so Lily can return to keeping James in line. Reggie, Chris is in his room for the time being, setting himself up with Adam and Sean. Can you go keep an eye on them while I take care of these children and check on the twins, please?” Regulus nodded and left with a smile.

Neville huffed curiously at Ginger. “How many kids do you have?”

Ginger smiled at him and patted her belly. “This will be number ten, unless it’s twins again.”

Harry felt that confirmed she was insane. He got another look at her face and frowned. “Have I met you before?”

She laughed. “I’m Ginger Alfaerus, green eyes. You ran into me at the World cup. I’m Geoffrey’s wife.”

“More like my keeper.” Geoffrey rumbled pleasantly, coming down the stairs. “You left Chris up there without putting a watch to make sure he got it done without picking another fight?”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Ginger smiled warmly. “And Reggie’s playing warden. You must have passed him on your way down.”

“He didn’t complain?” Geoffrey asked, eyes wide.

“Would I have made him do anything?”

“Ginger, you run a mean guilt trip.”

“Silence, or you can go relieve him of his duty. I do have to take care of guests, too, you know.” Ginger shot back, still utterly pleasant, before turning back to Lily and the teenagers. “Anyways, the meeting is downstairs, and the den is clean, if you want. I think I got all your rooms clear, but I could be wrong. I’m working off of Reggie’s memory of who went where, really. I felt I should make sure you all got in place. I … hmm, Lily, can you cancel the shrinking charm on the trunks? I must say I tried to work through one of your spells a few days ago and, well, let’s just say it didn’t go over.”

Lily blushed. “I’m so sorry –“

“No worries.” Ginger blithely brushed her off. “I’m used to it. Half the time I can’t unspell anything Geoffrey’s done first without picking it to pieces, either, and that takes a fair bit of time. Rather not take the time if I can just ask.”

Lily smiled and quickly unshrunk the trunks, stepping downstairs with Geoffrey to the meeting and leaving Harry and the others to follow Ginger as she led them, smiling, to their respective rooms, her daughter resting quietly on her hip. Harry wondered if any expression ever crossed her face but that pleasant smile. When she showed the girl’s into their shared rooms, she promised that supper would be in a few more minutes. Harry wasn’t sure whether to look forward to it or not.

In their room, however, Harry found that Ron was already there, lying solemnly on his bed, and that apparently Kreacher's good mood was more useful than he'd thought. The room had been expanded, and there were now three beds within. Thinking clearly, now, he remembered that it had been that way in the other rooms as well, the rooms holding the beds properly once more. Neville happily took the bed at the far end of the room, where it sat recessed into the wall, and Harry was left across the room from Ron. The noise of their arrival finally appeared to sink in for the previous occupant, and he sat up.

"Hey."

"Hey Ron." Harry offered. He didn't know what to ask. He knew Arthur had been attacked, but not much else, and he wasn't sure ... no, he knew he couldn't tell Ron he'd heard about it from Alan ...

"It was my dad." He offered, finally. "He got bit by some ruddy snake of You-Know-Who's while doing something for the Order. He's stable, finally, but ..."

"St. Mungos is full of excellent healers." Neville piped in. "They'll get him back together just fine. Is there any trouble coming his way, or ..."

"Nah." Ron shook his head. "Professor Dumbledore came up with a good excuse for him to be there."

Harry merely nodded mutely, letting the conversation fall into silence as all of them settled into their nooks.

The call to supper was fortunately not long in coming. Getting downstairs, however, was a tad interesting. They exited their room only to have to immediately step aside as two children raced by, going down the stairs at unsafe speeds.

"Chris, if you don't stop chasing Sean I'm going to hang you from the rafters by your ears!"

Harry blinked, and watched as Regulus descended the stairs at a quick, but sane pace behind the children, and heard the two boys yell childish insults back up the stairs, and then at each other. Abruptly, both children stopped, as a young woman spoke up.

“Boys! If you don’t stop this instant, I’ll see about giving you turnips for ears! You know better, so stop giving me a headache!”

Harry, Neville and Ron traded looks and immediately set down the stairs after Regulus. At the bottom, a brown-haired girl who looked about Nanna’s age was glaring at the two boys, who’d stopped in place and were eyeing her mutinously. Another girl from out of sight spoke up,

“Andi, if mum hears you talking like that, you’ll be the one with turnips on your head.”

The girl addressed turned to look into the stairwell. “You wanna listen to them screaming again? I’ve had enough of that!” She turned back to the boys. “Downstairs, now. Or I scream for mum to deal with you. Merlin, Mary and Morgan, she’s downstairs, so go see how she likes your bickering. Scat!”

The boys stuck out their tongues but sullenly descended the stairs, the blonde running, followed sullenly by the one Harry guessed was younger. In front of him, Regulus sighed.

“And you girls need to be downstairs as well. C’mom, boys. Supper’s coming.”

Harry didn’t want to run into Alan again. Unfortunately, he saw no way out of it without skipping supper, and that would leave him hungry and open to questions. He did not want to be hungry. Silently, he followed Neville and Ron down, coming out to find the room and table expanded by several seats. Present, Harry saw, were the majority of the Weasley family, minus the older boys, and then what could only be Geoffrey’s children and wife besides his own mother, Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape. The only seats left were beside Alan and Andrew, and Ron was clearly uncomfortable at the thought of sitting by Andrew much less the

Slytherin. Neville's mutinous face told him all he needed to know: He wasn't getting any quarter, especially since James was not there, most likely having only dropped by during a break in work.

Harry sighed. Caught between a rock, and one Hell of a hard place.

Awkwardly, Harry sat down. He was unsure of how to handle treating Alan. His actions last summer seemed so long ago; he remembered being vaguely polite, but Alan's difficult request at the end of term left him unsure of how to deal with his lingering frustration. Alan only gave him a short, quiet look before turning back to a whispered conversation with Andrew. Harry had never imagined he'd be this uncomfortable sitting between the people he counted as his best friends, but here he was, wishing he were elsewhere.

No conversation was required of him between sitting down and the array of food arriving. Quiet requests for food were easy enough and a full mouth prevented invasive questions. However, ignoring conversation to eat meant he finished long before everyone else, and he was thus left stuck at the table, waiting for it to be polite to leave.

It didn't promise to come anytime soon.

Several conversations were going on around the table. Harry could tell through looking that Lily had Severus, Ginger and Geoffrey all talking with her about something she must really love considering the amount of hand motion going on. Ginger kept turning away to attend to Vivica and the other two youngest children Harry had seen. Across the table from them were the two boys Harry had seen running downstairs. Seated between them was a clearly irritated older sibling, possibly the boy named Adam Harry had heard mentioned since the rest of the children across from him were all girls. Nanna and Melanie had apparently taken to them immediately, as they were throwing ideas back and forth between them without stop, handling the identical girls like they would the Weasley twins. Harry was pleased to see that Ginny was smiling. He hadn't been able to do much to get a smile from Ron himself.

The other end of the table was an apparently serious conversation that surprisingly included both Black brothers in civil conversation.

Remus, beside Dumbledore, was pointing at his napkin on the table and drawing some form of lines without care for the food getting on the cloth from his dirty knife. Fred and George were listening intently. It seemed only Neville and Ron and Alan and Andrew were having anything resembling individual conversations, and Harry felt mildly lonely. He was considering tuning into his little sister's discussion when Andrew laughed loud enough to get the majority of attention. Apparently he missed the sudden lull, and his answer to Alan was perfectly clear.

"Hel-lo, Alan, Draco is a stubborn little snotrag with delusions of grandeur. My father may be pureblood enough for Lucius' tastes, but myself? There's that vampire problem, and proper purebloods do not associate with vampires even if they are blood children. Lucius would have a cow, and then my dad would lose that lovely proposition he's been trying to get Lucius to make since summer. It'd be lose-lose if I tried to go along. I'd be miserable, and dad would be set back again."

Across the table, one of the twins laughed. "Andrew, I didn't know your dad wanted Lucius."

Andrew threw his napkin at her. "Doe, stop being a brat. You know what I mean."

"Did you also mean for the entire table to overhear that?" The second girl twin asked. Andrew paused. Harry felt he should have noticed sooner, as the Order was now staring at him in mild horror. A chuckle went through the Alfaerus family as Andrew smacked his hand into his forehead.

"What Andrew is referring to is that his father's family has been long-term friends with the Malfoy's since the two split upon the Mayfair's emigration." Geoffrey spoke up. "It's expected that they remain friends. The 'proposition' he referred to is indeed an invitation to join into Death Eater activities, but Velorian has been feeding information about Lucius' illegal exploits to several aurors he trusts since he was a teenager."

"What's some American doing that makes Lucius want to hang out with him? I thought he would have detested Americans." Sirius asked cautiously.

Regulus answered. "The Mayfair's have maintained, by an admittedly fine line, the pureblood standard of only marrying purebloods. Tara is pureblood by ... two generations?" Regulus directed the question down the table. Geoffrey started a short count on his fingers.

"It was her ... great-great grandfather that was a muggleborn. So yes, two generations."

"So, yeah. And since Velorian became the Head of his family when he was about ... nine, I think?" Geoffrey sent another affirmative up the table, so Regulus continued. "Do you really think Lucius would not court such supposedly easy prey?" He didn't wait for an answer. "But then he did something wrong and Velorian's hated him for years. Takes vindictive pleasure in foiling him and Lucius still hasn't caught on."

"I don't trust a man who hangs out with Malfoy when he knows about the Order." Molly scolded. "It's not safe."

"Velorian actually doesn't know anything about the Order." Geoffrey interjected. "He insisted he not be told, in fact. He finds it highly amusing to be free to drink the tea no matter what truth serum Lucius has put in and give him evasive answers all the time." Several people choked. "Stop freaking like that, besides a vampire guardian, Velorian has an antidote to veritaserum and good enough Occlumency to avoid giving answers he doesn't want to give. Not to mention an exceptionally irritating ability to speak half-truths. Andrew is here because he insisted on seeing Alan, and as a vampire he's already got exceptional mind defences. Koreol knows of the location as well. That's it. Dumbledore," Geoffrey gave a short nod to the leader of the Order, "approved both of them being informed. With Koreol knowing, Velorian felt no need to be informed himself."

Harry noticed a murmur of dissent, and felt like snorting. Knowing that a very old vampire knew the location of their Headquarters had sent a shiver of fear through everyone present. Harry had dealt with knowing

Koreol last summer, and he found himself trusting the man completely. Andrew's attitude was contagious. It helped that he knew Koreol knew how much he meant to Alan – and with how much Alan meant to Andrew, Koreol would not want to hurt either boy by extension.

"Sheesh," Andrew whispered. The silence allowed Harry to overhear what was most likely meant only for Alan, "Am I really that scary?"

"Sometimes." Alan whispered back. Harry could hear his smile, and then felt him flinch and turn a sharp look at Andrew again.

Finally the main silence broke as Severus spoke up.

"It is enough for me that Koreol would not do something to harm Velorian or Andrew even by extension. As such, their family and closest friends are a 'resource' Koreol will protect as well. There is no reason for him to go against their interests. With Velorian feeding a grudge against the Malfoys, it places himself and Koreol against the Dark Lord; a position advantageous to us right now. The information of this building could not be forced from Koreol by torture or guile, and any attempt against Andrew courts his wrath. He is a much better ally than an enemy."

The veiled threat sent the more conservative members of the Order into frightened whispers. Harry could hear Molly's voice with a thin thread of panic, and he sighed. She'd take the absolute longest to calm down. He was considering standing up and leaving when Alan, followed by Andrew, stood quietly and begged off. Severus sent them on their way, and Harry waited a few minutes himself. But when he wanted to ask, Lily was engaged in conversation again, much as the rest of the table was. Harry was stuck in place for nearly ten more minutes before he finally caught his mother's eye and excused himself to head back upstairs. She'd have killed him if he hadn't cleared it with her.

He wasn't sure where he was headed. His room wasn't private enough, and he was still conflicted on how to deal with Alan. Currently, everyone else was at supper – the house was empty, and unlikely to fill again soon with how the conversations were going. The

most likely people to leave next were Neville and Ron who would either go to their room, or play chess – leaving Harry alone.

Well.

If he wasn't going to be disturbed, he could try and work out with Alan the issue of when to deal with the matter of informing his father that he thought his concepts were outdated and elitist. Which would not be the week before Christmas. Maybe the week after; Hell, three days after, but not before. Alan would understand that. Hopefully.

Going by Ginger's comment that they were all in the same rooms as before, Harry went up the stairs and found that the door that had led to Regulus' rooms now was decorated with a small wooden sign engraved, 'Do Not Disturb; Alan'

Harry raised his eyebrows and opened the door anyways. He paused when he looked through, and it took a moment before he could really follow what was going on.

Alan was laid back on the bed, shirtless and completely lax, with Andrew kneeling over him. His head was turned to one side, and Andrew's face was completely hidden as Harry could only assume he fed off Alan's neck. It was shocking, Hell, disturbing, but also completely fascinating. He couldn't look away, couldn't even really think, only stand there and watch, noting small details of Alan's breath quickening and Andrew's mid-long hair as it fell across his cheek and hid any sight of the point of contact. He couldn't even feel time passing until Andrew's head lifted, and he looked up and met Harry's eyes, his white eyes glowing as he licked traces of blood from his lips and teeth. His mind finally kicked back into gear, and Harry felt, for the first time, truly afraid of Andrew, truly aware that Andrew was indeed a vampire.

"Hey," Andrew said quietly, "next time a door reads 'Do Not Disturb' it's there for a reason."

Harry blinked again and looked to his side, and then turned around completely to realize the door was shut behind him and he'd stepped into the room. A shiver ran up his back as he realized he was shut in

a room with a vampire. Firmly he closed his eyes. Alan was his friend. Andrew was Alan's friend. Alan, quite obviously, completely trusted Andrew. Andrew wouldn't do anything to him without his permission. Irritably, Harry finally turned around and opened his mouth to answer.

Nothing came out.

Harry tried again, and, finally, just asked, "How did the door get shut? And don't just say I shut it, because I want to know why I don't remember it."

Andrew's mouth quirked. "It's minor hypnosis. I just wanted the door shut so no one else would look in, and since I'm not quite good enough to send you out, shut the door, and keep you from reacting, I felt it best to bring you in since I know you're a smart kid anyways. Or at least I hope you are." He folded to sitting on the bed beside the still quiescent Alan, and while Alan was clearly breathing he hadn't otherwise reacted yet.

Harry nodded slowly, and swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. "I just wanted to talk to Alan."

"Give him a few minutes." Andrew assured him.

Harry looked back at Alan and found it was still creepy. He could see the small holes from the bite marks, which, although they were no longer bleeding, were very red and very prominent with his skin looking whiter than normal. Alan's eyes were still closed, but he was stirring slowly as though waking from a deep sleep. He didn't sit up, though, but just lay quietly in place, apparently oblivious of his surroundings. Andrew sat quietly beside him on the bed, but he was watching Alan with a slightly disturbing fascination.

Harry made a note to not walk through the door like that again.

Finally, Alan asked something Harry couldn't hear, but Andrew quickly grabbed his arm and pulled him into a sitting position. Once he was up, he crossed his legs and scooted around to face Harry with a blank expression. Harry shifted awkwardly. Alan's mouth twisted into a bitter smile.

“Enjoy the show?”

“No, actually.” Harry answered honestly. “It was creepy as Hell and probably started a ‘List of Things I Never Wanted to Know About My Best Friend.’”

Andrew barked a laugh, and then leered at him before licking at the bite mark he’d left on Alan’s neck. Alan swatted irritably at him, and turned back to Harry.

“Why’d you walk in anyways?”

“I hadn’t thought Andrew would be …” Harry couldn’t think of a word to use that wouldn’t be taken as impolite. What did they call it? There weren’t exactly vampire etiquette classes, even for purebloods.

“Feeding.” Alan offered, smiling. “Politically correct and everything.”

Harry nodded shortly, and at Alan’s raised eyebrow, continued, “I just wanted to try and … explain why I didn’t take you up on the offer of studying.” Alan’s face closed immediately, so Harry hurried to explain. “It’s not that I’m still scared, or not so much. It’s just … I don’t want a repeat of second year. I want to enjoy my Christmas with my whole family, and not ruin it for everybody by getting my dad angry. I’ll do it the week after, a few days after – but not the week before. Please, Alan.”

Alan eyed him for a moment longer, and then shrugged. “That makes sense. I guess I didn’t think about it.” He turned a sharp gaze back at him. “So. Do you want to join the study group after the holidays, then?”

Harry gave him an honest smile. “Sure.” He ignored the twisting nervousness in his stomach. “I’d love to. I’ll bring Neville along, too.”

Alan smiled warmly back at him, and Harry felt the nervousness disappear. He could do this. His dad needed to just grow up. His dad, not him. He was right in this. He was.

Andrew leaned over Alan and slung his arm around his throat. Alan turned back to him with a frown. "Andrew, personal space." He growled.

"Awww," Andrew whined, "you didn't mind earlier."

"Andrew," Alan sighed, and then huffed. "Grow up already."

Harry laughed quietly, and frowned slightly. "What ..."

"Harry, vampire questions equal too much information. Maybe if you come over for the summer or something, but not now. If you don't want to cause a stir, you'd probably better go cheer Neville on in playing chess against Ron or something." Alan answered calmly.

Harry frowned, and then nodded slowly. "Yeah, I suppose. You will explain eventually, though."

"Careful," Alan began. Andrew cut him off.

"I'd love to take the time to explain the nuances for you, Harry." Andrew's tone was soft, warm and sent shivers up Harry's back that weren't fear, or weren't entirely. Harry swallowed and shook his head before leaving quickly, hearing Alan begin to berate Andrew again and, as he went lower, he felt a smile work its way onto his face. It was amazing how getting rid of one trouble could make everything seem much brighter. Grimmauld wasn't looking so gloomy anymore. A few days here wouldn't hurt at all, little kids or not.

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It was only a few more days at Grimmauld before everyone split to their respective homes for the holidays, leaving the Alfaerus to take over the house in peace. With only two days, there wasn't much going on before it was time to open presents. Nanna was all over him being home, and wouldn't stop chattering during the dinner Christmas Eve, but he didn't really mind. Harry went to sleep smiling and watching the small mantle clock Neville had given him last year, impatient for the morning. He'd open his gifts, and then it would be supper with the Longbottoms. There had been a promise of a New

Year's party at Grimmauld, since most of the families had plans for Boxing Day, and then ... well, then it would be return to Hogwarts and the High Inquisitor, and the start of studying with the Slytherins. The thought sent him into a cold sweat, but Harry stubbornly stood by his decision. He would do it.

He woke in the morning without the worry of the night before, and climbed into his dressing robe to hurry downstairs. They opened gifts at the Christmas tree, and Harry came down, passing his barely woken parents on the way. They both gave him sleepy smiles, and continued to join Nanna, bouncing impatiently on the loveseat. Both parents smiled.

"Have at it." James ordered. Harry and Nanna eagerly complied.

The selection was brilliant. Ron, Hagrid and Molly were predictable: Ron gave food, Molly, the snacks and the sweaters, and Hagrid had sent him a furry wallet prone to biting anything put near its mouth. Supposedly it was an antitheft device, but Harry supposed it'd be better as a decoy or purse protector – once you figured out how to control it. Remus, Sirius and his father had gotten him a very large present that Harry opened and gaped at. It was another auror-level gift: a ten volume set of Practical Defensive Magic, which covered everything defensive from house wards, to hexes and jinxes, to magical items and armour. James finally nudged him to encourage him to move along, and Harry stuck his tongue out at him before turning back to the opening.

The next gift was marked from Hermione and Neville both. Harry couldn't help but smile. They were definitely a couple. Inside were American Duelling robes, probably owl-ordered, that were slit up the sides and made from some strange magically enhanced fabric Alan had tried to explain once and confused himself on, since it was a Australian import Harry had never heard of either. Surprisingly, beneath the duelling robes were another set of casual robes, coloured rust to the duelling robes' charcoal. Pinned on top was a small note in neat writing Harry took a moment to place as Alan's. It simply said, 'Gift from me'. Suitably cryptic for the quintessential Slytherin. When Harry picked up the paper to pocket it, it darkened a shade, and then vanished in his hand a few seconds later. Harry

shrugged it off and stood up to show them the second set, which he soon realized with a laugh were also slit up the sides much like Geoffrey's were. James was very impressed with 'Neville's' taste. Harry cynically wondered what James would say if he knew Alan had bought him the casual robes. Determinedly, Harry asked permission to change into them for the day and ran upstairs after getting it. He hesitated, and then put on his serpent pendant as well. The colours went well together.

Neville definitely noticed the statement when he came over that evening. None of the parents did, but Melanie was eyeing the pendant carefully. During the meal, Harry and Neville were seated together and took advantage of Sirius and Remus engaging their parents to have their own, private conversation.

Neville laughed as he finally commented, "Feeling a tad rebellious are we?"

"Of course not. Dad thought the robes looked nice and I wanted to check out how comfortable the slit sides were."

"And the necklace?" Neville raised his eyebrows pointedly.

"The colours suit each other. Besides, my parents like both."

Neville's eyebrows really sought his hairline at that point, and he turned away and shook his head, running his hand over his wrist where a new watch rested and chuckling to himself. "You really make a statement when you choose to make a statement, Harry."

"Yep. Now, where'd the watch come from?"

Neville flushed. "Hermione. She bought it from where they're out skiing, and enchanted it herself to be pretty much the standard wizarding watch. You know, unbreakable, glows on command, tarnish-proof. She did a really good job, too. The spells should last several years, maybe a few decades really."

Harry took his turn to chuckle. "You two are so cute. What did you get her?"

Neville's face coloured even more, and he murmured, "The family clock you got last year. I already put on you, Ron, and myself; didn't have the materials to add her parents. I didn't know whether to add our little sisters, but I left a note with the instructions and told her to ask me when we got back if she wanted the others added."

Harry smiled widely. "That's so cute."

"So," Neville straightened and continued, "Did you get Susan or Alan something?"

His tone was quiet enough no one else would catch the extra name, but Harry still felt himself swallow around a disproportionate lump.

"Well," He forced himself to answer calmly, "I got Susan a small bag of hair clips and ties – she's growing her hair out again, and Blaise got a wand holster since I noticed he doesn't actually have one, or if he does he certainly doesn't use it and should. Alan got a set of novels, actually." Harry had been extremely surprised to find that Alan liked reading muggle true crime novels, but it had been surprisingly easy to slip away from his mother in a grocery store in muggle London and buy three books he thought Alan might like. They were almost expensive, so he wasn't worried if they were ones he already had. Besides, he'd admitted most of his books were American, and the selection differed between the two countries.

"Novels?"

Harry snickered. "Muggle ones to boot. He likes those 'true crime' stories."

Neville shook his head. "That's just weird."

"Neville, did he ever claim he was not?"

Neville shook his head and just laughed. "Lay off, eh?"

Harry smiled victoriously. He then paused, and carefully asked, “Do you want to join me in studying in the library after we get back to school? I found a table that we’d be welcome at.”

Neville turned back to him with full attention and snorted incredulously. As he realized what Harry meant a small smile crossed his face. “Sure. Sounds like fun.”

Harry smiled at the agreement and turned back to his meal. Yes, he did like this change in pace. They were right; he’d been stifled, because he was finally feeling like he could breathe again.

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New Year’s Eve was the party at Grimmauld with most of the Order. Hermione had been invited over, and Neville and her had disappeared somewhere to snog or raid the library – Harry wasn’t sure which, and didn’t really want to know. Ron had gaped after their quick exit, but shaken himself out of it and wandered around. After the supper was over, Ron had gotten a taste of the alcohol Sirius had brought and been almost instantly lightly buzzed, much to Molly’s chagrin. She wasn’t too worried though, as the worst thing he did was challenge Alan to a chess match. It’d been four hours since. They weren’t anywhere near done. Apparently Ron played as mean a game buzzed as he did normally, and even if it were wearing off, he was still focused enough to not care that his opponent was a Slytherin. James had sent several disapproving frowns their direction, but Lily was – exasperated and annoyed – herding him away every time he turned a glare that way. It was probably for the best, as Severus had been sending him angry glares all evening when James wasn’t looking. Harry had almost wanted to disappear several times.

An hour or so before midnight, on a walk up the stairs to escape the noise, Harry found himself walking into Dumbledore who was looking into the library with a small smile. Harry frowned, and walked around him to glance in, barely refraining from a strained chuckle. Hermione was sitting on Neville’s lap with his hands resting lightly on her waist beneath her shirt. Clearly they were completely oblivious to the world. Harry sent a raised eyebrow at the Headmaster, and Dumbledore quietly eased the door most of the way shut, ushering Harry to follow

him down a landing. On the floor below, Dumbledore quietly smiled at Harry.

“Do not start giving me such a suspicious look. I was merely seeing if the library was empty and clearly it was not. They are not engaged in anything of concern, although I can also clearly see you don’t believe me.”

Harry shook his head and tried to clear his face. Yes, he did actually believe. He just didn’t like Dumbledore and hadn’t for years. He was too manipulative.

“Harry.” Dumbledore asked softly, “How is school for you? You seem to be doing fine, although your minor hostility to Alan has been a concern in the past.”

“Sir, it was mostly just rivalry. We were equal on the Quidditch pitch, and both male.” Harry reassured him, and then struggled for an answer to quell that in turn. “It’s … it doesn’t seem right to keep up with it after what happened last year, though. That was just unfair. Rivalry doesn’t belong when someone has everything else stacked against them.” Harry forced himself to look up and meet Dumbledore’s eyes as he finished, “I certainly don’t believe the trash about you and him the ministry is throwing around, though. He is not a liar and you wouldn’t have done anything so underhanded.”

Dumbledore smiled warmly at Harry, and Harry felt something against his forehead. He couldn’t think of what it was for a long moment until it went away and Dumbledore nodded to him with the same smile and wandered off. It hit him like a ton of bricks, and Harry leaned against the wall and cursed himself. Legilimency. Thank Merlin for Alan insisting he learn to keep everything about their friendship behind his shield. Dumbledore had no right to do that to him! No right, especially without reason.

“Look, it’s not your fucking problem!”

Harry turned at the furious yell and darted down the stairs to find the drawing room again. He stumbled into it and found the adults were all in a circle, and in the middle were two men Harry sadly thought he

could name even without seeing them clearly: Regulus and James. His father, and a Slytherin. Harry didn't know whether to thank god it wasn't Severus and James, or to curse his father himself for being an arrogant fool.

Off to his left, it was almost hilarious to see that Ron and Alan were still playing chess, the older Alfaerus children watching with interest. Harry looked between the fight and the chess game and then firmly pulled himself away from the yelling match that Kingsley and Sirius were trying to break up to go attend the Chess game. Curious, he sat next to the older boy, whom Harry couldn't remember his name, and eyed the board. Most intriguingly, it appeared Alan was losing. A second thought reminded him it wasn't that odd; it was Ron Alan was playing, after all. Slytherins did not monopolize tactical skills.

"I don't care how many times you say it, there is nothing to redeem the Slytherin house!" James shouted again.

Harry gave up and buried his face in his hands. "I got all my genes from my mother, I swear."

Alan started laughing quietly, and playfully ruffled Harry's hair. Ron gaped at them a moment, and frowned.

"Harry, you just –"

"What?" Harry interrupted. "Got Slytherin germs?"

"He's had those for years." Alan calmly answered. "After all, I helped you people out when you got the bright idea to go after the Sorcerer's stone."

"Alan!" One of the Alfaerus twins watching the game cried. "You're not allowed to break your opponent with extraneous double-talk! It makes the game not fair."

"Sorry Andi, but it's just too easy."

"Hey!" Ron snapped back to attention and frowned. "You move your castle back to where it was, and don't even try to argue it!"

Alan sighed and obeyed. Flashes of light behind them indicated what Harry hoped was the end of the fight. As Ron finished the chess game, he watched Harry and Alan carefully, ignoring the soft giggles coming from the Alfaerus children around him.

A half hour later, and with the end of the game finally in sight, the clocks announced midnight, and the New Year. Silently, Harry met Ron's still confused expression and just smiled thinly. New Year's resolution: Stop playing dumb. The Slytherin could come out to play.

A/N: Christmas! In August! But hey. It works. There are several long involved parts involving likely confusing characters, but I promise - the story is mainly Harry's POV, in Britain, focused on Voldemort. They will not take over. Several points mentioned here will come up again affecting events regarding Harry and Alan, but those won't be clear for a while yet. Capiche? So don't give up because the strangers are taking over; remember, Geoffrey was teaching here so he'd want his family near and Grimmauld's as safe a place as any.

Cackles evilly And you will kill me next chapter, I promise. Cliffhanger and everything. The rating will be met once more fairly soon, and not for the last time. Enjoy? Thank you for reading, please review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The next week passed quickly, and as the time came for them to return, Harry almost wished he didn't quite have to. The prospect of dealing with Umbridge again was irritating, and Harry felt like pulling his hair out. Finally, it was time to catch the train back and he determinedly reminded himself of meeting up with Alan after they got back. When they arrived at Kings Cross, Lily immediately hailed Alice and Harry watched them with a smile before heading back to the train to find Ron and the others. Surprisingly, Ron, Hannah and Susan were already sitting together with Hermione standing between them. She'd been crying. Harry ditched his trunk to go to her immediately.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" His eyes, however, had found evidence he didn't want to see. She was holding a shattered watch.
"Hermione?"

"He threw it at me when I tried to talk to him!" She sobbed. "He was talking with that cow Padma in the prefect's compartment. I went to say hi, and he didn't even look at me. When I tried to get his attention he grabbed my wrist and told me he wasn't interested, and I—" She flushed," I slapped him, not hard. He stepped back and threw that at me and told me to leave him alone. I couldn't stay; I ran here. I'm sorry, it just—"

She fell into sobs again, but Harry wasn't thinking. He couldn't think. He felt like something had crawled into his ears and made his brain simply disappear, because this must be the twilight zone. She couldn't have just said Neville did all that. Neville didn't do that. Hell, Harry had spoken with him four days ago and he'd been looking forward to seeing Hermione again. He hadn't taken the watch off since he'd gotten it. This couldn't have happened.

Harry finally registered that someone was pinching him and his arm said it wasn't the first time. He yelped and glared at the perpetrator and found himself looking at Susan.

"Earth to Harry, come in boy. Are you thinking yet?"

"I was thinking." Harry groused. "It just wasn't making sense. Are you sure that was Neville?"

"There can't be two idiots of that calibre on the train that Hermione would normally talk to, now can there?" Hannah snapped. "I don't know what he was thinking, but that is despicable."

Harry's mouth moved around a phrase he didn't dare utter at the moment. 'Neville wouldn't do that.' He wouldn't. Harry had known him since they were children, and Neville didn't change that abruptly. Harry sighed heavily and felt the train begin to move. He must have been out of it longer than he'd thought. Hermione and Hannah, unneeded in the prefect's compartment on the way back to Hogwarts from break, remained in their compartment, and Harry stood firmly.

"I'm going to go talk to Melanie."

Hannah nodded, still sitting with Hermione. Hermione had started crying, sobbing and clutching the watch she'd put so much effort into spelling. Harry hoped he didn't run into Neville. He'd punch him before getting him to talk, and that would not be a good start. His brother just didn't do that. When had he lost his mind? He couldn't be under outside influence; his parents were aurors and would notice. Neville could fight the imperius, and love spells and potions were unlikely. Harry didn't think Padma was prone to that, besides which how would she get it to him? Maybe it would work itself out? Maybe

...

Harry finally found Melanie's compartment, and upon opening it was attacked by a dusky and fluffy cat almost as comical in appearance as Crookshanks. Ginny jumped on it.

"Arachne, get back in here. Harry's safe. Hey, what are you doing looking us up?" Ginny asked. She was sitting with Melanie, Nanna and Luna; surprisingly, Dillan had joined them as well, sitting next to the door and glaring at him for intruding. He was surprisingly good at it.

"Hey Ginny, where'd you get the cat?" He couldn't help but ask. It was a sleek animal, having calmed from its enthusiastic puffball

attack mode, and admittedly gorgeous when calm. It also appeared to be at least part kneazle.

"Blaise gave her to me for Christmas." Ginny blushed. "She's beautiful. Said she's kneazle and turkish angora."

"Very nice." Harry nodded. He turned to Melanie next, but didn't miss that Nanna seemed to be eyeing Dillan. Oh, he didn't need that but he swallowed any protectiveness for his own safety. He was here with purpose, not to defend his sister from nonexistent threats. "Melanie, can I talk to you?"

"It's about Neville's stupidity, isn't it?" Melanie said baldly. Harry felt his heart drop. It was true, then, and wasn't limited to Hermione. "He hasn't talked to the rest of us or mum or dad since he decided to fall off his broom on the Western boundary, concuss himself and break his wand. He's been fucking miserable since, and no, I don't know why."

Lead dropped into his stomach. "When did this happen?"

"Three days ago." Melanie shrugged negligently. "It's fucking stupid. Dad says it might be the concussion, but I wouldn't know. They've been arguing about getting him to see a mediwitch, but he doesn't want to go. He's in deep shit right now, and probably digging himself deeper."

Harry's face fell, and he struggled with himself for a moment before nodding slowly and stepping out. He couldn't face this. Neville was hurt, Hermione was hurt, and for some reason Neville just kept making it worse. What the Hell was he thinking?

Harry squelched any desire he had to go seek Neville out. He couldn't do it. He couldn't deal with it. He'd pick a fight, and probably lose and if Neville was as unstable as he was, Harry didn't want to face his arsenal. Forcefully, Harry calmed himself down and then remembered he'd seen Alan in his compartment in the next car on the way back. Maybe Alan would have some idea. Although Blaise and Neville might pick a fight, it probably wouldn't be too bad; Blaise stubbornly kept track of Neville's ability, and it would be his choice to

face off with it. Harry needed someone to talk to who might possibly understand. He couldn't handle losing Neville right now; he was completely off balance. And he couldn't go face him.

Knocking on the Slytherin's compartment door and ignoring the fourth year Ravenclaw staring at him from the next compartment, Harry awkwardly waited for the door to open. He was surprised to find himself face-to-face with a scowling black sixth year. It took him a moment to remember his name. Speaking to Alan about the Slytherins wasn't the same as facing them himself.

"Salvador?" Harry asked awkwardly. The boy tilted his head, and from behind him Alan scolded,

"Let him in already you buffoon. Harry, what are you doing here?" Alan's voice was curious, not aggressive, and Harry sent him a strained smile when he could see him.

"I needed to find someone smart to talk to, since Neville's sent his head on vacation. Something's wrong with him and I don't know what, and if I try and talk to him right now I'll throttle him."

Alan's eyebrows rose, and Blaise grunted. "He was acting dodgy when I passed him in the corridor. Looked like a ruddy storm cloud. What's wrong?"

"Can I step in? Or ..." The compartment was full, but Salvador pulled Lucille into his lap and Tracey scooted from sitting by Alan to press against Theodore's side. Blaise remained stubbornly where he was – sitting by Alan's right. Harry happily took the open seat and sent a meaninglessly pleasant smile at the defensive Blaise. Alan groaned.

"Both of you grow up. Blaise, no picking a fight with Neville until we get back to the school. Harry, what's happening?"

It hurt to explain it, but Harry did. "Neville's apparently split abruptly with Hermione. Hermione found him in the prefect's compartment talking with Padma. He ignored her when she tried to get him attention, and then- threw her Christmas gift back at her, broken. She went back to Ron's and my compartment in tears. I went to ask

Melanie what had happened – he'd been fine when I spoke with him four days ago! He was eager to see Hermione again, and hadn't taken the watch off since he'd gotten it! – Melanie told me he'd fallen off his broom and gotten a concussion three days ago, and been miserable ever since. He – he also apparently broke his wand in the fall."

Everyone winced. Alan paled. "It's really upsetting to break your wand, Harry. Completely broken?"

"I don't know." Harry answered. "We haven't talked at all in the last few days; I'd just heard he was grounded and had other things to do. I really don't know what happened. Thing is, he's always been bad on a broom; he can fly, but sometimes he'll just have an accident. It isn't the first time that happened, it isn't even the first time he's been badly hurt by it! But he's never had such a reaction before."

"Sometimes concussions can cause abrupt changes in a person's personality." Lucille commented. "Did Melanie say how bad it was?"

"No. She did say her father had mentioned it and had wanted to take Neville to a mediwitch, though."

"It probably would be best." Lucille mused. "Concussions are serious. Magic in someone's brain is delicate, complicated work when you're healing. We can heal ourselves very well and very quickly, especially in brain damage, but it's not as expedient as when a mediwitch helps." She came out of her mental textbook and offered, "He might stabilize to normal again in a few days, provided he isn't cursed into oblivion."

Harry laughed without humour. "He chose a ruddy stupid plan of action for that. If Blaise doesn't attack him, Hermione just might. And if something happens to Hermione, I'm going to attack him whether he likes it or not. He's got the wrong kinda friends for that."

Lucille shrugged. "Well, it would certainly get him in to see Madam Pomfrey."

Alan laughed at Harry's startled expression. "We're Slytherin, Harry. Any means to achieve our goals. Or nearly any. If you want to be a good Slytherin you need to have only a few things you won't do. Hexing someone to get them to see the mediwitch for a completely different problem is not unheard of." Alan shot a glare at Lucille and she smiled sweetly back.

"You were being foolish, Alan."

"Severus was taking care of it just fine."

"No he wasn't."

"Yes, he was. Stop arguing."

"No, he wasn't. Stop arguing, Alan, before I hex you again."

Alan sat back with a bright smile. "Lucy, do you want to face off against Harry and Blaise?"

"Harry's not that scary." Lucille countered, but she shot a worried look his direction. Harry made sure to smile sweetly at her, the perfect Gryffindor. Lucille froze and sighed. "Fine, I'll stop. You haven't changed my opinion though."

Harry pouted. "I was trying for harmless. What scared you off?"

"Last time I attacked a 'harmless' looking friend of Alan's I got bit."

"Andrew did not bite you." Alan countered. "And what on earth made you think him 'harmless'?"

Harry began to look forward to spending a bit more time here. He looked across at Blaise. "Do they always do this?"

"Yes." Blaise answered, smiling. "Lucille's taken to treating Alan like a little brother, and Alan acts the part perfectly in telling her he can take care of himself. It's been a while since she's stopped when he threatens her with his side, since neither Tracey nor Theodore are

good enough to go against her and she can take me one-on-one. Nice having you here for backup.”

Harry nodded and tuned back in as Lucille scoffed,

“Gryffindor back up is not frightening.”

“Neville probably knows more spells than you do, Lucille. He’s past seventh year in some of the spells he can cast at any rate.”

Lucille smiled thinly. “Yes, but he’s currently a screwball right now, isn’t he?”

Harry had surged to his feet before he could think, and the spell was out of his wand before he could consider another action. Lucille shrieked for a long moment before it registered that it was a simple powered-up tickling charm, and then she struggled to cancel it, failing the first time she tried. Tracey had leapt into Theodore’s lap, much to his embarrassment, and the door to the compartment was thrown open by an irritable older Ravenclaw. He wore a prefect’s badge and was scowling at the commotion. He cancelled the spell and frowned at the students.

“Alan, stop making a commotion. What was that uproar about?”

“Harry felt Lucille’s comment was an insult to his friend and took offence. Sorry about that, Jonas.”

“Be a little more discrete, would you? Since when are you friends with the Potters?”

Alan looked at Harry a moment, and shot a short glance at the prefect. Harry felt conflicted for a long moment before he nodded slowly. Alan’s smile widened.

“Since second year.”

“You ripped each other apart third year, Alan.”

Alan merely raised his eyebrow, and Jonas turned to look Harry over. Harry wasn't sure what to make of the black-haired seventh-year, but waited for the other shoe to drop. He'd certainly never heard of him before. When he finally met the hazel eyes again, Jonas was smiling vindictively. He offered his hand to Harry.

"Jonas Hodges, Ravenclaw seventh-year prefect. Nice to meet you; I've heard a few good things, more bad, all promising."

Harry felt a bit thrown, and accepting the handshake carefully. "Harry Potter. I'm sorry to say I've never heard anything ..."

"That's alright." Jonas smiled. Harry noticed his smile never touched his eyes. He had the silly thought he should count his fingers. "We're not the most popular family among aurors. Slytherins and Ravenclaws and mostly self-centred without being Dark enough to join any causes. Please don't cause that much noise again without silencing the compartment, would you?"

He waved off and stepped back into the hallway, waving the students back into their compartments as he went. Alan shut the door, ignoring Lucille's irritable glare. Harry sat down heavily.

"I'm sure I've heard the name somewhere before." Harry insisted.
"Who are the Hodges?"

"Jonas summed it up pretty well, actually." Salvador answered. "I was surprised he said that much. He really meant it when he said they were self-centred. They don't do anything without gaining something from it themselves."

"Mild immunity." Alan offered. "Harry's the son of an auror. If he's friendly with an auror's child, people will think twice before questioning him."

Harry blinked. "And he isn't in Slytherin why?"

"He spends more time in the library than talking with others, that's why. It's the only reason Hodges are ever Ravenclaws, when they love books more than people." Salvador answered. "I've heard he can

also stay awake through Binns' lectures, to boot. Only Ravenclaws can do that."

"I suppose." Harry murmured.

It was interesting, and comfortable hanging out with Alan. So much so that he was caught by surprise when the train began to slow. Harry stood with a nervous twitch, and Blaise laughed derisively.

"Ashamed to be seen with us?" Blaise scoffed.

Harry coloured. "No, just habit, I suppose. I feel like I'm forgetting my stuff even when I know it's going to be taken in without me. And I left Hermione completely alone ..."

"She was with Susan and Hannah. I'm sure they were fine with it." Alan soothed. "You needed to calm down, and try not to run into Neville getting up to the castle. Do you not want to walk with us?"

Alan's eyes were carefully stern.

"No, it's just a change in routine." Harry admitted. "And yes, it's a bit unnerving, but since Ravenclaw will be talking about it for days on end, I might as well stick with it. Crying women ..." He shut up as Lucille's eyes flashed. Alan smiled and clapped him on the shoulder before they awaited the stop.

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Fortunately enough for Harry, he didn't have to avoid Neville: Neville avoided him. He didn't even see him as he entered the hall until he'd sat down and found him talking quietly and ridiculously closely with a giggling Parvati. Harry couldn't believe it; first he hadn't thought Neville would ever sink so low as to chat up the Patils, and second that the Patils could be stupid enough to buy it. Harry and Neville had never given them the time of day before unless they had to. Neville had brutally ignored Padma at the Yule Ball, but it appeared all was forgiven for some bizarre reason Harry couldn't figure out.

Dinner between those left behind was tense. Hermione sniffed sadly several times, and if looks could kill Neville would've keeled over from Ron's furious glares. Harry couldn't be angry, not yet. He was far too confused. Maybe he could get something straight that evening?

It didn't happen. Neville went straight to bed and the spells – augmented by Neville from within – didn't allow contact. Normally by intent Neville let Harry in when he wasn't irritated with him. Perhaps there was just a lingering jealousy? He'd had a bad day or two coming into Christmas break, himself. Perhaps ...

Morning came, and Neville was gone before Harry even woke. Again, at the morning meal he was sitting with Parvati. When Harry and the others went to History, he lingered and nearly came in late, again with Parvati. Harry was growing sick and tired of the blithering bimbo; he didn't know if he'd be able to stand seeing Neville doting on her for no reason.

That class, Harry stayed awake through it all, although he heard not a word Binns said: He was staring at Neville as though mere will power could divine the reason for his behaviour. Finally, frustrated, Harry attempted to accomplish Legilimency as Alan had described it. It didn't work; they hadn't worked on it, but it gave him something to do, something to hope for during the frustrating class, especially since he forgot for a time that Neville had mastered Crystal Occlumency. He might as well have tried to glare a hole in the wall.

Apparently following Parvati had become Neville's mantra; it was completely befuddling the entire class save for Lavender and the last air-headed girl, Sophie. The two of them were giggling constantly. Hermione and Ron were seething with anger, and Seamus and Dean determinedly stayed out of it. Averill stayed mostly neutral, but she eyed the other girls with disgust. Harry suspected she both didn't care, and remembered how badly Neville had treated them before. Walking into a class with Draco as well as the off-balance Neville left Harry's back itching nervously. He couldn't stand it.

Hermione looked helplessly around the Potions classroom as Neville took the seat by the oh-so-grateful Parvati, and Harry stepped forward to take her arm. She twitched, and finally whispered, "I'm

“sorry,” before pulling helplessly away. Averill stood and took her arm, sitting comfortably beside her at the front.

The rest of the class shifted nervously as everything changed by that move; the Gryffindors jumped when the Slytherins began to change position in accordance. Harry heard Ron squeak as, instead of Harry sitting beside him as he’d expected, Theodore quietly asked for the seat as Alan firmly grabbed Harry’s shoulder and steered him to the seat Blaise normally took. Blaise sullenly allowed Daphne to pull him down in the seat behind Ron, as Tracey invited herself beside a now-silent Sophie. The Gryffindors not expecting the sudden change fell abruptly silent as they absorbed everything, and Ron was almost bug-eyed as he stared at Harry quietly accepting the invite and unpacking his items.

Harry turned and gave Hermione a small, sad smile that she seemed to completely miss in her incredulous stare. Harry laughed quietly and finished unpacking his items, turning to address Alan, “What’s with the takeover?”

“The awkwardness was killing me. Besides, you need to actually get good grades. Theodore’s good at explaining things so if Ron is willing to listen it should help. Besides, I didn’t think it would be healthy for Ms. Roper to sit behind Hermione and consistently beg for help from Parvati’s new ‘boyfriend’.”

Harry’s face fell into a rictus of pain. Alan nodded slowly. “It’s all over Ravenclaw, Harry, almost overwhelming your friendship. ‘Neville’s taken with Padma; did you hear this, did you hear that?’” He shook his head. “Disgusting, some of it. Whatever happened to cause this, it’s big. Because he’s gone completely around the bend.”

Harry’s response was cut off as Severus stormed in and to the front; however, the look he wore when he found Alan sitting next to Harry was almost enough to completely break Harry’s funk. The shock faded into a stern ‘we-will-talk’ look and then Severus started the class. He stopped almost immediately, and swooped down onto Parvati, Neville and Lavender.

"I believe the class is in session. Thirty points from Gryffindor for talking while I am speaking. Do you think you would like to teach the class, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville rolled his eyes and scowled, but said nothing past a short shake of his head.

"Good. You will not speak when I am speaking, something I'd thought you'd learned several years ago. Apparently you have chosen to revert; do not do so again. Just because you have a new girlfriend," He sneered, "doesn't excuse anything. Speak again and I separate you."

Severus stormed back into his introduction; he was almost finished when he paused and glared at Neville's table again; Neville had turned to speak to Lavender. The sly smile on Snape's face disgusted Harry. Neville's issue wasn't an excuse to jump on him with impunity, but he couldn't argue that Neville had earned it. He still hated it, though.

"Longbottom, detention. You will pay attention when I am speaking, or have you completely emptied that cavity you call a mind? Since you cannot control your flapping maw, you will leave. I won't have some air-headed plebian blowing up my dungeon because he cannot pay attention."

Neville's eyes flashed with anger, but he subdued it in complete silence and angrily packed his bag. Before leaving, he leaned down and pecked Parvati on the cheek. Hermione, watching, gripped the phial she'd been pulling from her bag hard enough to shatter it in her hand. Averill quickly pulled her hand away from it. Severus frowned, but didn't make a single mean comment. He sent Averill to follow Hermione to the Hospital wing. After he started up the lesson, he watched Harry and Ron with focused interest and a thoughtful expression. Harry's heart sank, unable to really focus on the lesson himself; this was not good at all. His friends were falling apart.

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After lunch, Harry went to the library to read alone, but couldn't concentrate. His mind was running circles about Neville; he just couldn't figure out what to think. Neville's actions were so contrary to nature that Harry felt like he was floating in space. It was stupid, pointless. Idiotic.

His eyes were not watering, either!

"Harry?"

Harry looked up at the voice he didn't immediately recognize. It was choked with tears; when he found himself look at Hermione, his heart sank.

"Hermione. What happened now?"

Hermione walked slowly over, hiccupping every so often, and then she collapsed at his feet, burying her head into his lap and sobbing. Harry immediately folded over her trying to pull her back up.

"Hermione, Hermione! What's wrong, tell me what happened, what did he do?" A slow rage finally began to build, and Harry felt his hands shake slowly. "Hermione, tell me what happened."

She sniffled again, and began to talk through her sobs. "He sat with Padma again; they –they kept just chattering under the teacher's lecture no matter how many times she scolded them. He –he kissed her too. I couldn't stand it! I can't believe – I threw a hex at him, but he blocked it and glared, and I just ran out. I couldn't –can't watch him do that to me! What happened? What the Hell happened, Harry?"

"I don't know." Harry murmured. He was crying now, and he just couldn't care. "I really don't know, Hermione. He was fine five days ago, he was looking forward to coming back, to seeing you and ... Melanie told me he had a broom accident, broke his wand – you saw the new one, it's much darker than his old one – and he's been a total bastard since. Maybe it's just because of the concussion, but it seems a silly excuse. I only said it because it's come up twice."

"If it's a concussion, why hasn't he seen a mediwitch yet? They should've taken him to St. Mungos for that." Hermione spat.

"Lucille," Harry balked, but continued, pinking slightly, "Lucille's a -- Slytherin friend of Alan's, she said that brain injury is delicate in witches and wizards. Adding external magic can very very easily cause more harm than good. It's best to just let the wizard or witch's own magic heal it. So ... maybe he'll improve with time. We'll get it out of him one of these days, Hermione. I promise. Something will work out."

Hermione sniffled again. "I don't want to wait, Harry. He was my first boyfriend; it was ... it was just, so nice having him there. He could keep up with me, he could talk to me without thinking me strange, and now ... now he's hanging all over those stupid whores, girls I know he hated before, he couldn't stand them. How could he suddenly prefer them over me? How could do that, Harry?"

"Hermione, how do you think I feel?" Harry returned. "He's been my friend my whole life; I know him better than I know myself, and now he's hanging all over girls we would never have spoken to without getting our teeth pulled. He's not even speaking to me, who's been his friend for years, and he's suddenly dumping a girl I knew he cared for and all of this when I spoke to him half a week ago and he was perfectly normal! I feel like I'm walking through a sandstorm; I can't even begin to think straight! You've only known him for four and a half-years; I grew up with him. Ron's fit was clearly jealousy; I don't know where this came from."

Hermione sniffed again, and then pulled a chair over and sat up. "You said he -- he had a broom accident?"

Harry waved it off. "Hermione, Neville has had more accidents on a broom than I have and I play Quidditch. He doesn't. He's never been sour about it before; why should he start now? You don't even fly; he wouldn't have pushed you away because of an accident."

"He could be feeling ashamed." Hermione offered quietly. "Apparently it was bad; you said he broke his wand. I can't imagine having that happen."

Harry wavered, "I guess ... but really. He knows he can share anything with me. It has to be something else."

Hermione shrugged, but her posture said she didn't agree. Harry stubbornly refused to believe her. This wasn't just shame; it couldn't be. It simply couldn't be.

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Geoffrey's class was tenser than Potions, but the teacher had the acumen to not try and pair Neville with Ron, Harry, or Hermione after he asked to swap partners. Geoffrey, however, refused to pair him with Lavender; he finally settled on Averill after having a short glaring match. He watched Neville through the class with sharp eyes, and he did not miss the distraction displayed by Hermione, Harry and Ron either. It was unnerving, and Harry felt his concentration devolve into confusion once more; he didn't get the spell right at all. Neither did Hermione, nor Neville. In fact, Averill was the only one to succeed during the entire class. Geoffrey was plainly displeased, and lectured the class for the last half on concentration and reaction time. He sent them out with a longer frown, slightly earlier than expected. Neville was kept behind. Ron dragged Harry away to supper before he could try and wait.

Something inside him quailed and died as he walked away, and Harry's pain kept him from seeing clearly as he ate, and then dully walked back to the common room and landed uncomfortably on his bed.

He didn't know how long he lay there before someone else entered the room, but he did attend when he heard Neville's quiet voice, talking to himself. Harry sat up immediately and found Neville muttering over his open trunk. It shut loudly and Neville turned and froze when his eyes met Harry's. Harry searched his gaze for anything and felt a slight tug in his gut when he saw something flinch in their depths before Neville turned abruptly away. Harry stood from his bed immediately.

"Neville, what's going on?"

“Potter,” Neville growled, “did I spend any time flapping my mouth at you earlier? No? Then maybe I’m not interested in talking to you.”

“I don’t buy that.” Harry growled. “You’re not that mean, you’re not that stupid, and you’re not that cruel. I don’t know what happened to you-“

“Oh, so you mean you didn’t pry at my sister about it?” Neville growled. “You didn’t go and look her up rather than seeking out me on the train? Fancy that. Maybe you didn’t really care. I’m not buying it, Harry, so don’t even try it.”

Harry felt stunned, but immediately returned the venom, “Maybe you shouldn’t have thrown your watch back at Hermione, after breaking it when she’d put so much time into enchanting it.”

“It was a stupid gift, why should I kept some trivial trinket?” His tone was odd, like he was convincing himself. Harry was beyond caring.

“Some trivial trinket?” Harry growled. “She spent hours enchanting it, you shit-head, and she did it for you and you alone! You don’t just break it and throw it into her face. I can’t believe you could do something so callous and cruel!”

Neville laughed derisively. “Cruel? That wasn’t cruel; it was just petty and stupid.”

“You hurt Hermione, Neville, and hurting her hurt me, and it hurt Ron! Blaise can’t believe you, and neither can I! You’re acting like Draco, you snivelling coward!”

Neville turned and Harry was stunned at how abruptly he entered a palpable rage. “Don’t you dare compare me to that Death Eater scum, Potter. I am nothing like him, and I am no coward!”

“You could have fooled me. You’re hanging all over the Patils; did Hermione scare you off when she proved to be just as smart as you are?” Harry scorned.

Neville's hands fisted and clenched, his knuckles white, and he abruptly turned and stormed down the stairs. Harry raced after him.

"Neville! Don't you dare leave! You're not going to leave without explaining yourself!"

He caught up with him at the bottom of the stairs and grabbed his shoulder. It was a mistake. Neville turned and grabbed him in turn, ramming his back into the wall.

"Keep your hands off me, you fucking bastard!" Neville growled.

"Hell no! You're the one who's being a bastard!" Harry grabbed Neville's index finger and yanked backwards. Neville let go and let his hand move with the force to keep his finger intact. His other hand grabbed Harry's windpipe. Harry let go to save his throat and suddenly pain exploded behind his eyes: Neville had grabbed his head and slammed it into the wall. Harry choked and Neville changed his grip and lifted Harry further back before slamming him into the wall again. He let go, and Harry slumped down the wall, dazed.

His head was pounding atrociously; Harry couldn't think, but he knew he was angry and he knew whom he was angry at. When Neville seemed ready to simply leave, Harry lifted his leg and kicked him in the knee. Neville collapsed with a scream, and turned and slapped him. Harry reached up to return the favour, pulling Neville off balance and to the floor beside him before punching him. He missed the throat, but hit his shoulder, and then everything froze. Harry couldn't move, but he could certainly hear.

"What – do – you – think – you – are – doing?" McGonagall was breathless with rage. Harry felt himself lifted up and lowered several feet into the room. The motion made his stomach rebel; he was going to throw up if he wasn't still soon. McGonagall put his down, and he swallowed quickly to try and stem the desire to retch. The nausea was flowing in waves behind his eyes. She released both of them at once, and Harry collapsed forward to cradle his throbbing head. Neville said nothing; it was Hermione who finally spoke up.

"Professor McGonagall?" Her voice was tiny.

McGonagall was silent for a second before she nodded carefully. Hermione coughed lightly before continuing, her voice trembling with emotion.

"I'm not sure how it started, but several of us heard yelling upstairs shortly after Neville came through from supper and went up. Harry had gone up earlier, immediately after he finished. They came back down, Harry yelling at Neville before he grabbed Neville's shoulder. Neville –" Her voice broke, "He – he grabbed Harry and threw him into the wall." She choked again, and Ron stepped up beside her, whispering. She sat, and then Ron continued in a dull voice.

"Harry just – just slumped to the ground, and Neville just stood there until Harry stirred and kicked his knee, knocking him down. They were back to trading punches when you came in."

Harry lifted his head in time to see McGonagall turn her burning eyes on them. "Mr. Longbottom, you will come with me. Mr. Weasley, would you please help Mr. Potter to stand and follow. He needs to go to the hospital wing if he can walk without vomiting. Harry?" She inquired softly.

Harry valiantly tried to stand, but couldn't quite make his arms and legs work with him. Ron came over and pulled him up, and dazedly, he followed as he was led to the hospital wing. He couldn't really think straight, and felt his mind drifting as they silently made their way to the realm of Madam Pomfrey. She immediately set upon him, and Harry's mind slowly cleared until she handed him a phial and told him to drink. Obediently, he did so. He regretted it immediately; the potion tasted foul. It did clear his head straight away, and he remembered with worry and anger the fight he'd just finished. However, when he looked around, McGonagall and Ron had apparently already left, and Madam Pomfrey hustled over with a set of the pyjamas her patients wore. Harry felt his stomach sink.

"Madam Pomfrey, do I really need to stay overnight?"

"Mr. Longbottom gave you a concussion, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey snapped. "You will remain for observation. You will not complain. You don't play around with a concussion."

"Will I start acting as ridiculous as Neville because of this?" Some of his confusion must have lingered, because he never would have asked that normally. Madam Pomfrey frowned.

"What makes you ask that? People don't suddenly change their behaviour over a minor concussion, Mr. Potter. Wizards don't suffer that at all; it's rare even in muggles. Mr. Longbottom may simply be growing up, Mr. Potter, as difficult as it might be."

Harry finally acquiesced and took the clothes, but continued, "What's the verdict on our fight?"

Madam Pomfrey frowned at his phrasing. "Mr. Longbottom will be in detention for a week, and McGonagall has taken him to talk to Headmaster Dumbledore. You will be receiving a day's bed rest and then three days detention in my care, since most of your healing will be on your own and I need to observe you anyways for any complications. Concussions are not to be trifled with."

"I heard from Melanie Neville had a concussion over the break." Harry offered. "I really –"

"Harry." Madam Pomfrey interrupted. "Alice has been trained in medimagic. She knows as well as almost any mediwitch how to treat the condition and any complications. Neville is fine, no matter how combative he might be. Sometimes teenagers will go through moods that seem completely unreasonable. Now, change and lie down. Things will sort themselves out, I promise."

Harry obediently let her raise the curtains and changed, crawling into the hospital bed and lying down to go to sleep. He didn't believe her about Neville, though. Something was wrong, and if it wasn't physical, it was something else. He knew he'd seen something bothering him when he'd caught him in the dorm; he just needed to figure out what.

A/N: taps chin and hums Well, stuff is happening. You just need to figure out what. grins Thank you for reading, please review?

And on another note, the last year is at the beta. Now we just wait for her to return it, and then ... Good things happen, I'm sure. Looking forward to what you all think.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty- Eight

Neville's aggression did not clear up. In class, he sat with one of the Patils. During mealtimes, he was always with Parvati and Lavender. Harry couldn't understand it, but he watched him intently. The first detention Neville was supposed to attend he skipped. McGonagall came into the common room to haul him out, apparently to another talk with Dumbledore. Neither seemed to do any good.

Harry's own detentions were mostly reorganizing the medicine cabinets under Pomfrey's watchful eyes. It wasn't hard, and he didn't complain. It had been one Hell of a fight, and one he did not want to repeat. He'd had headaches for two days straight, and Pomfrey had refused to give him any more potions for the pain because it would interfere in his own healing, so he'd suffered through them and watched.

Two days after his detention finished, the school buzzed with news: Neville and Blaise had gotten into a huge fight in the library; neither had gone to the hospital wing, but a bystander had. It took several questions before Harry found out it had been Dillan. Melanie was actually the one to answer that: she, Ginny and Luna had been studying with Alan and his when Blaise had picked the fight. Dillan had been keeping Ginny out of it when stray spell had struck him. Nobody was really sure whose spell it was, but he was out cold still. Blaise and Neville had detentions. Harry wondered how long this would continue. Neville was making a horrible mess of his life.

The mess merely expanded. Sunday, Neville ended up in the hospital wing cursed senseless. No one knew who was at fault; both Patils were in tears. Harry had to stop Hermione from cursing them. Fortunately, the effort kept him from cursing them as well. Around lunch, Hermione and Ron stubbornly went outside, but Harry wandered up to the hospital wing, wishing there was something he could do to make more sense of everything. When he entered, he paused: Neville's parents were there, sitting and talking earnestly by his bedside. Neville was feigning sleep quite well, but Harry was looking from the wrong side, and saw the light glint off his open eyes. He simply stood there at the open door, knowing Neville could see him. His parents were too busy talking. After another few moments,

Harry left without ever really entering. There was nothing for him there.

Wandering aimlessly, he ended up at the library. It was almost default. It occurred to him he hadn't sat with Alan and his friends once since they'd returned. It just hadn't crossed his mind; he'd been too worried about Neville. He wandered in tiredly and began to weave through the bookshelves, not really caring where he was going until he came to a fork. He chose the left side, and apparently it was the correct one: he came out and found himself staring at Alan's little group sans Alan. Harry blinked.

"Oh, sorry." He offered. "I'll just –"

"Sit down, Harry." Blaise ordered tiredly. "You're stressed, losing marks, and Alan should be back soon enough once he finishes playing tonsil Quidditch with Luna. Or looking up a book; I can never tell with those two."

Blaise winced slightly as Ginny elbowed him, but he recovered and pulled out the chair next to him for Harry to take. Awkwardly, Harry did so but he felt very out of place. Conversation moved on, and Harry finally asked Blaise quietly,

"Are you all right? I only heard about the fight."

The group fell silent and Harry felt his face heat. Blaise put down his quill and rubbed his face gently.

"It was Jonas who cursed Neville earlier, alright?"

Harry blinked. The name meant nothing to him, and he opened his mouth to ask when Dillan spoke up,

"Hodges don't like it when perceived allies pick fights. You might want to be careful about crossing him right now; sometimes the connections they can perceive can be a tad odd."

That didn't help, and Harry said so. Blaise huffed, amused, but Luna answered, coming in from the shelves with a worried Alan.

"Jonas is a nice boy; Neville just needed to be kicked in the head again. It'll happen a few more times, and then the house of cards he built will fall down."

Harry whipped his gaze around to Luna, "You know something about what happened?"

Luna blinked and her gaze sharpened until Harry felt that she was completely coherent right then. She smiled and the expression left, but Harry didn't forget it.

"I don't know everything; I don't know why. I just know it will resolve in time. Don't all things?"

She wasn't fooling him. "You know something." Harry insisted. Alan smiled crookedly and pulled up a seat, pulling Luna into his lap and then whispering quietly into her ear. The sight tugged on Harry's heart; Neville had done that so many times with Hermione last term; he could remember it clearly. Trying to remember him this term felt like staring through tissue paper: nothing was really clear.

Finally, Alan straightened and looked at Harry again, "She's got a small divination talent with cards and looked it up after Blaise picked a fight. She's actually perfectly sane, she just gets lost in her part."

Harry understood him perfectly, but three years of friendship reminded him to listen for the sibilant speech that was parseltongue. No one else understood the admission. Harry nodded slowly, and responded in kind,

"I know something is up; it's not just him losing brain cells. Something is bothering him and I don't know what. I hate it. I can't stand losing my friend like this."

Alan nodded solemnly, and then reverted to English. "But you still need to keep an eye out for Jonas. He might be decent as a friend, but God help you if he turns on you."

"Why'd he rip into Neville?"

"It was Neville's fight; he was the reason for it. So whichever spell hit Dillan was thus Neville's fault. The Hodges and the Bakers are thick as thieves; a slight to one is a slight to the other. Sometimes they overreact."

Harry ran a hand over his face. "Alan, your friends are impossible."

Alan smiled. "Currently, so are yours."

Harry summed up his feelings in a quick gesture and leaned his forehead onto the table. "Why can't I think?"

"It's called stress." Luna piped up. "It's a bit like – like a storm cloud that won't stop raining." She smiled so wide it spilled into her voice. "You've got your own spot of rain that just follows you around like a good little pet."

Harry didn't bother raising his head to that insanity.

"Luna." Alan's voice sounded a bit despairing. "Even when you try to be sane you manage to sound completely odd."

"A storm cloud is not crazy."

"They don't tend to follow people."

"Then call it a metaphor. Writers use those all the time."

"You're speaking. Most people don't speak in metaphor."

"Would you rather I insist it was a Spearpod Halluphor?"

"Fine. Storm cloud."

"I knew you'd see things my way."

Harry raised his head. "Is there a sane person at this table I can sit next to?"

Several of the others traded looks and snickered, but Daphne immediately shoved Tracey onto Theodore's lap and raised her hand with a smile. "You can sit by me, Harry. I'm sane."

The gesture made him smile; he brushed aside the thought that she was flirting with him, and moved to sit next to her as she'd invited. Flirting was normal and sane. He'd put up with that any day. He noticed she was working on the History essay and Harry leaned onto his elbow to look it over.

"You sure that's the war he was talking about last week?" Harry asked. "I wasn't listening."

"You and the rest of the student body." Daphne laughed. "I double-checked with Su Li during Charms, so yes, it was."

Harry immediately began to ask a few more questions, and ended up borrowing paper and finishing the essay he hadn't even begun to work on. He was completely focused, and missed the amused glances everyone at the table shared for Daphne's final success at getting his attention. He probably wouldn't have cared right then either.

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Classes were difficult. Shortly after they'd gotten back to school there had been another Educational Decree restricting the information teachers were allowed to impart to their students, Harry supposed in reaction to the breakout of Azkaban before Christmas. He hadn't really noticed with the issue with Neville. Also, Geoffrey had simply brushed it off, saying that politics were as much Defence as magic was. Umbridge hadn't jumped on him about it yet since no one was mentioning it to her. However, all of the teachers were agitated, talking quietly in the halls and huddling with others they trusted. Chances are, having Neville acting up was only exacerbating their stress. It certainly wasn't helping Harry's.

Of course, the other problems were side effects: their school work suffered. Neither Harry nor Hermione were getting their homework done, and none of them were on task. Through the end of January,

Harry knew he, Hermione and Neville didn't do anything good for their teacher's nerves. As one, their grades completely staggered, and thus Ron's fell as well. Harry didn't think he'd have made a single potion correctly if he didn't work with Alan; Daphne had bumped out Averill as Hermione's potions partner to ensure she remained on task, and surprisingly Snape did not complain. Ron did fine with Averill as his partner; she made him less jumpy than Theodore did and Theodore enjoyed partnering his girlfriend, Tracey. Harry had to wonder just how sane Severus was in pairing Neville with Blaise; he wouldn't have recommended it with Neville sane, much less in his current state. However, apparently Blaise was more capable than Harry had given him credit for; their potions certainly never turned out correct, but neither did it ever explode despite Neville's carelessness and antagonism. Blaise's sharp retorts kept down Neville's disparaging attitude, so the class could proceed without any large disruption.

Surprisingly, that made Potions their best class by far. In no other were they on task.

Thus, while classes were miserable, they were also tolerable. Outside of them, Neville tended to avoid Harry and his group, even going so far as to leave behind Parvati and Lavender if Harry appeared inclined to approach him despite their presence. It was an interesting tactic, as it was something Harry completely didn't expect with his lackadaisical attitude during most classes. It was incredibly intelligent and highly tactical: it didn't fit with his negligent and blithe behaviour.

Of course, trying to convince the others was pointless. Ron didn't care, and bringing Neville or the Patils up with Hermione was a good way to get scratched. Alan opted out for lack of information and trying to get Blaise to talk was like pulling teeth. He admitted to trying to corner Neville and get him to fess up, but also showed the burn he was hiding on his arm from the last attempt. It didn't keep Harry from seeing the disturbed look on his face: Blaise knew something was up, too. His sadness at it made Harry wonder how Blaise's own life was going, but he couldn't add more stress right then.

Neville was stubbornly avoiding being cornered or having his act called by anyone at all; Draco had passed a comment on his

attentions to the Patils and gotten hexed almost off the map. The reticence made Harry just want to smack him one, something he was certain wouldn't get him anywhere farther than the concussion he'd suffered the last time he'd pressed. His own injuries and Blaise's only reinforced Harry's conviction that it truly was an honest problem, and not just some abrupt affectation of 'growing up'.

The Saturday thereafter, however, Harry was sick and tired of Neville's ridiculousness. It had been more than two weeks, and Neville was to all appearances working his way through the Patil's robes to their knickers. Harry wouldn't have believed it if it had come from anyone but Blaise, who had caught him and Padma in a nook with his hands up her shirt. Blaise had another burn; Neville had as discerning attention to spell effects as before, and Harry didn't want to put up with this any longer.

Thus, that Saturday, he was in the library when he ran into Neville again. Finding him was an accident. Finding him snogging Parvati seemed to precede a temporary leave of his sense as he screamed at his former friend.

It was a firm reminder of just how skilled Neville was, but it also left Neville in a position to remember that just because he knew more than Harry, Harry was stronger and knew most of his arsenal. Of almost all of the spells Neville was willing to use in a library against Harry, Harry knew the counters very well. The fight was almost equal.

Madam Pince nearly killed them until it came out that apparently three students had taken it upon themselves to shield the books, one of which had been Neville. Harry and Neville were both denied the hospital wing after Madam Pince made them end the spells upon each other. Harry had had his left shoulder dislocated, and a burn across his stomach; Neville had a burn across his right arm and his left wrist dislocated. He was also sporting a black eye and singed hair. Harry's robes around his stomach were burnt, and two bruises on his chest made breathing painful, something he refused to outright admit. Each had several superficial cuts, and both of them limped as they separated after the fight, Gryffindor fifty points lighter, and expected back that weekend to serve an all-day detention dusting the library.

The Slytherins' shortly proved to Harry that a private fight didn't happen in Hogwarts. They came out of the library shortly after his eviction and tailed him to the courtyard, continuing discussin an apparent breakdown of the fight. Daphne hit him with a minor healing spell as soon as there was no one else around, and breathing quickly improved; the only things that had been healed were the dislocations, and even still his arm was sore. Harry gave her a short nod, and finally turned to Alan.

"Why are you following me?"

"Making sure you're all right." Daphne interjected. Alan sent her a quelling look and she quieted, but Harry smiled weakly at her, making her beam.

Alan sighed at her antics before answering, "We are concerned, and I also want to ask what on earth possessed you to pick a fight with him in the middle of the day in the library, of all places. You just about gave Lucille a heart attack, and I don't think Jonas is pleased with either of you two."

Harry gave a wry smile. "I'll presume those were the other two shields on the books?"

"Course." Lucille growled. "Those books are glorious holders of knowledge, and you and that punk just start flinging spells as though they were scrap heaps."

"Sorry." Harry ducked his head. "I wasn't thinking. He just ... I'm still off centre."

"Off centre?" Blaise scoffed. "More like your head is in orbit."

"Sod off, Blaise!" Harry scolded. He blinked when Daphne echoed him, and then shared a wry smile with her.

He completely missed the chuckle that went through the rest of the group, and Daphne's brilliant smile was just a pleasant view.

Sighing, he scrubbed his hand over his face and shortly apologized to Lucille for endangering the books. She accepted with an amused smile of her own, before turning to scolding him for his grades. His beseeching look at Alan was met with more amusement.

‘Sheesh. Slytherins.’

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Harry couldn’t imagine how anyone had kept Neville’s fights from getting to Umbridge for dealing, but apparently they had, because two days after his fight in the library, Hermione and Parvati had a beat down in the halls before Ancient Runes. Umbridge came in. Both girls were given detentions, but apparently since they were fighting over a boy it was limited to normal lines, a thousand each of “I will not lose my head over the male gender”

Hermione found it extraordinarily funny, but was very grateful that Harry and Alan had gotten Umbridge to rescind the blood quill. As Hermione was a faster writer than Parvati, she finished easily the first day; Parvati had to return for another detention the next evening. However, when Hermione came into the common room her eyes seemed to zero in on Neville sitting and flirting with both Lavender and Sophie. He’d been watching the door, but stiffened when he saw it was Hermione. Harry noticed her pause, her eyes locked on Neville for several long minutes before she made her way back over to the chairs around the fireplace where Harry waited.

“Harry, do you still think something happened that made him turn on us so badly?”

Harry blinked; he hadn’t expected her to ask that after so long. “Yes, I do. Why?”

“Because … I think he looked …” She fought with herself before admitting, “sad. He looked sad when I came through the door. And not like it was disappointment, it was just … I could be completely wrong, sorry.”

"No." Harry insisted. "He is sad, he's pushing us away on purpose and I want to know why."

Hermione eyed him for a moment before nodding slowly. Ron grumbled into his essay, but didn't disagree. Harry, however, smiled weakly, and then turned curious. "What spurred you to pick a fight with Parvati anyways?"

Hermione flushed and looked like she wasn't going to answer; she turned away and had the bad timing to look straight at Parvati as she entered the common room looking tired. Neville stood and scooped her close instantly. Uncaring that he was the centre of attention once more, he kissed her thoroughly in front of the entire common room.

Hermione made a noise like an angry cat and the quill in her hand snapped as she clenched it in fury. She turned away and hissed, "That sultry little whore!" She turned back to Harry and Ron and found both of them looking at her in interest. Hermione breathed carefully through her nose and sighed. "She was lording over me the amount of time she and Neville spent in the broom closets. I couldn't believe she'd go into details."

"Jealous?" Ron asked. He was only curious, but he yelped as Hermione gave him a scathing look and then stalked off to her dorm. Harry could only shake his head at Ron and gathered up his own things, his homework simply a lost cause as usual and went to his own dorm.

This needed to stop. It was tearing them all apart.

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The next Hogsmeade weekend was on Valentine's Day. It did not help matters any. Neville was restricted to the castle, but Harry had the dubious pleasure of being the friend nearest Hermione when she had a breakdown remembering the pre-Christmas promise with Neville to go out during it and mock Madam Puddifoot's. Harry certainly didn't wanted to visit the dainty little tea shop, but he did promise to go with Hermione, and at least treat her in the Three Broomsticks.

Her happiness had more than made up for having to explain it to Daphne a few days later. He was quite glad for it; Daphne was sweet and adorable, but it was a little too much at the wrong time, especially with the suspicious absence of his father's weekly letters since the last week, and his mother's rather notable silence on the matter, excluding a small praise for having made new friends even with Neville being so difficult. It was sweet, but told him nothing. Fortunately, Daphne completely understood and praised him for taking care of her.

The trip was less interesting than it had been set out as. Ron had smiled and picked up Hannah, and Susan had given Harry a wan smile when she saw him walking with Hermione, but he'd spoken with her during Herbology about the difficulties and she understood. Hermione hadn't been interested in going too many places, and Alan had expressed a need to attend to other matters during the trip. Since he was going off with Luna, Harry wondered how honest he was being but didn't press; if Alan didn't want company, he didn't want company. Most of the rest of Alan's group were paired up, so it was just Hermione and he, wandering around and feeling lonely. They made their way to a booth in the Three Broomsticks almost by default.

Sitting and nursing a butterbeer in silence was not particularly entertaining. Both of them were too melancholy to talk, and too absorbed in their own thoughts to pay much attention to the rest of the couples interspersed through the bar. Apparently Draco thought that meant they weren't interested in anything at all, as he came through with Pansy on her arm and a self-satisfied smile.

"How are you two without the whore?" He jibed.

Harry looked up at Draco and wondered how much trouble he'd get into for using the fire spell Neville preferred; the Dark one resistant to magical healing he'd thrown at Blaise. Draco had taken to calling Neville a whore with relish during the second week. He'd refrained from using it to Neville's face after getting put in the hospital wing, but talking with anyone else loosed his tongue.

"Think he's slept with one of the Patils yet, or both? I haven't seen any of them today, so maybe they're busy jumping the empty castle. Wonder how great the chances are of him knocking them up." Draco laughed bitterly; Harry fought the desire to hex him, but knew he was losing. He didn't need to get into trouble with Umbridge again. "I guess he felt they'd be a little easier to fuck than the mudblood; pureblood rides better, you know, and at least he'll be able to find the hole without fighting that damn bush."

Hermione solved his problem. She hit Draco with a hair growing curse without even looking up; he squealed ridiculously, and grabbed at the rapidly growing hair falling over his eyes as his eyebrows sprouted into growth. Hermione hit him three more times with the same curse; nothing visible happened save for a rippling in his robes. Harry strongly suspected the other targets, and quickly stood, walking over to take Hermione's hand.

"C'mon, Hermione. I think he'll need a bit of space soon, and it's gotten very windy down here."

Hermione primly took Harry's hand and they both left the Three Broomsticks. Draco didn't call after them; he was too busy fighting the rapid hair growth that was crawling out of his sleeves now; neither he nor Pansy apparently knew the counter.

The hexing was the talk of the school that evening; Alan congratulated Hermione in the library, standing and kissing her hand and imploring to know how she'd made it so hard to counter: when he'd run into Draco on the way back to the school, he'd had hair dragging on the ground behind him from his sleeves and beneath his robes. Harry watched her talk and found that he really could believe the day to be a success: Hermione was much more pleasant, and the gloom that had ridden her was finally clear, at least for the evening.

It was more than he could say for himself.

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Going to sleep that evening, Harry felt like the storm cloud Luna had mentioned was hanging over his bed and promising dire things. It

took him a while to get to sleep, and he woke inordinately early, which was a surprise. Even more so was that Neville wasn't out of bed yet, either. For the past month he'd woken before the rest of them. Beating him up made Harry worriedly check the clock, but, it being Sunday, it was seven. Not remarkably early, if one discounted the level of avoidance Neville had taken to maintaining.

Harry dressed irritably, and then finally tugged on his shoes and stalked over to Neville's curtains. Enough was enough. Harry tugged them open, surprised that it worked, and then froze, feeling his mouth drop loose in surprise. Tangled in Neville's sheets were Neville and Lavender Brown. They were both completely nude, and Harry had no illusions about just what had happened. His head was spinning, and he didn't note Lavender stirring until she shrieked.

"Get out!" She shrilled. Neville sat up abruptly beside her and swore, glancing at Harry and then struggling to find his wand. The one he found was likely Lavender's, but it worked to jerk the curtains shut once more, the privacy wards cutting off Lavender's frantic voice.

Harry staggered away and sat hard on his own bed, his eyes remaining wide open in shock. Neville had slept with Lavender. Neville had slept with Lavender, of all people. Harry would have felt better if it had been Parvati, but Lavender? She had a reputation for being loose through all the houses. If he wanted to place himself as another whore, he'd certainly taken a proper step towards it.

The other boys were rousing; Lavender had one Hell of a shriek, and Neville and Harry were the only two who had added outer silencing charms to their curtains. With the others rousing, Harry began to worry about the further repercussions of Neville's newest indiscretion, but apparently he shouldn't have. Without seeing inside the curtains, Harry didn't know what preceded the next reaction, but Lavender staggered out of the curtains, wearing a short bathrobe and clutching her clothes, her bra prominent and gold dangling over her arms. She snorted and glared at Neville, who was framed within Harry's view in a loose pair of pyjama pants and no shirt, glaring back at Lavender with markedly less heat but no less conviction.

"Are you so shallow you're done with me already?" Lavender scoffed. "Parvati interest you a Hell of a lot more? She won't sleep with you and neither will her sister; are you as much of a whore as Draco –"

She didn't finish. As soon as her tirade moved into the last sentence, as soon as Harry could guess where she was going, Neville had shifted off the bed. When she called him a whore, he stood and backhanded her, his face a study of rage. Lavender fell against Harry; he barely caught her before she hit the bed frame.

"Do not call me a whore, Lavender, just because you're lonely. Get – out. I'm sick of your disgusting simpering."

Lavender held her reddening cheek and jerked out of Harry's reach, turning a furious glare of her own on Neville. "You certainly act a lot like a whore for someone who doesn't like the title."

Neville's arms shuddered and his eyes flashed; he was moments from violence. "Do not tempt me, Lavender. Get – out." Lavender opened her mouth again, and Neville roared, "Get out!"

She jumped and ran, barely missing getting hit again. Neville's breath shuddered in his chest, and he raked a hand over his hair, his eyes flickering to Harry, finally recognizing that he had an audience. He turned back to his bed, the sheets and blankets thrown about in careless ripples and, finding nothing to grab, he jerked the curtains shut once more and stalked out, to the showers most likely. He'd taken nothing with him save his wand, and Harry had watched. He wondered if anyone else had noticed the lost cast to his eyes, or if they'd only seen the unbridled rage. Harry couldn't imagine where to go now; whatever reputation Neville had, it was dead. Lavender would have the school calling him a whore within the week.

With his eyes shut, Harry could see the image of Neville striking Lavender again and again. That wasn't Neville. Neville was not that temperamental. He wasn't that angry. Why? Why? What went wrong? What was fucking wrong?

"Did you ... Did Neville really just...?" Ron's voice trembled as he asked.

Harry opened his eyes again, and Dean and Seamus were standing past the end of Neville's bed, staring wide-eyed at Harry. He could almost feel Ron's stare on his back. He didn't want to deal with this. Harry turned and refused to answer, grabbing his bathrobe, and, on impulse, grabbing the second one he had. It was Neville's; they had one of each other's in their trunks for convenience, to make things quicker when running to the showers in the morning. He wondered if Neville had kept his or thrown it out with Hermione's watch. Harry left for the showers himself without answering; he didn't heed their calls behind him either.

In the showers, no one else was in there, although the lingering steam suggested the earliest group had probably just finished; it was barely after seven on a Sunday. Harry could hear one shower running and sighed; it was probably Neville. Tiredly, he hung his bathrobe and then Neville's, remembering his friend with a pang of loneliness. Stubbornly, he turned and entered the stall opposite Neville's, stripping off his shirt before he felt a brush of cold air. It was so out of place he stopped, and in that moment he heard a hard, choking sob.

He froze.

What?

The sob returned, and then something metal rang light and high off the floor. Harry almost couldn't think, but a bitter curiosity ate at his mind until he stepped out and crossed the room silently to the shower opposite. The air outside the curtain was bitterly cold, the puddles on the floor as well. He could hear a series of thin, choked gasps within, and finally Harry steeled himself and drew back the curtain.

Neville was as observant as ever; he lifted his head immediately upon the intrusion, but there was no anger in his face, no malice. He looked broken and tired, and his left hand was gripped tightly against his right wrist; a thin trickle of blood ran between his fingers to drip into the cold water rushing across his ankles. He hadn't taken off his trousers; the fabric was soaked and clinging to his legs, as was his hair; he'd apparently doused himself already. On the floor, against the drain, a small sliver of a razor was simply lying there, forgotten.

Neville's wand was within reach on the bench, the new walnut wood darkened and wet as well. He seemed to be simply waiting for Harry to react; it was another, unfathomable turnaround in his behaviour. An angry word would almost be a relief. Harry couldn't begin to fathom what to make of the newest change, what to address first.

"Neville ..." Harry began, his voice trembling weakly. Neville's gaze returned to his hands, and Harry huffed. "What the Hell, Neville?"

Neville didn't respond, but he opened his hand to stare blankly at the cut across his wrist. It was still bleeding freely; he'd cut deep, but it was short. Neville's eyes drifted shut and he leaned his head back against the tile wall with a soft sigh. His hand, now weeping blood freely, drifted back to his side. Harry's eyes followed it transfixed. Neville was sending him on a roller coaster of emotions: betrayal, confusion, frustration, and now shock and horror.

Harry closed his eyes, and ground out, "Why, Neville?"

"I'm tired." Neville sighed quietly. "I just thought it might help."

"Cutting yourself?"

Neville laughed. It was sharp, and bitter and mildly hysterical. "Do I really seem that petty?"

"Oh, so you're just going to try and kill yourself right off?" Harry growled. He was getting tired of this ride. "What the Hell is so miserable that you're making such a fucking mess of your life? Do you want to be a whore? The best friend I had wasn't."

Neville turned to him, and Harry took a step back. The anger had returned to his eyes, but it was cold rage Harry had last seen in Blaise's gaze; a Slytherin rage. "You think this is what I want?"

"Well you're making some interesting choices for wanting something else." Harry snapped, returning cold for cold.

"Well guess what? That lovely broom accident Melanie so happily told you about wasn't a fucking accident. I was playing with the wards; you remember."

Harry remembered. Neville had pointed it out when they were nine, and Harry had as much fun as he did skirting the barrier on the Western side. You could feel a faint tingle as you crossed; it'd been a great game, and so long as they kept clear of the treetops, Neville couldn't even manage to crash himself. Saying he was playing with them, however, meant that Neville had been outside his manor's protections ...

"Someone hexed my broom and I fell – outside the wards." Neville's voice became transfixed; he was lost in the memory. Harry had heard his parents mention it, but he'd only thought it happened with horrible memories ... "Bellatrix." Neville's voice broke. "She'd hexed my broom down."

Oh, Merlin, Mary and Mordred. Harry wasn't sure he wanted to hear the rest, but ... would it explain ...

"She cursed me. Cruciatus. And then guess what, Harry? Guess what she did to me after I blacked out? Because I'd fallen through the trees, and that's when I got my concussion, so between the two I was unconscious."

Harry couldn't breathe. "You weren't hurt, physically." Harry knew it, but what it meant ... "Your parents would have noticed, so whatever happened, she ... nothing left a mark, at least. Nothing not easily mistaken for the fall." Did he want to know what had sent Neville on such a brutal spiral? A small spark, very Gryffindor, he suspected, insisted. He wanted Neville to heal, and he couldn't have told, he wouldn't tell anyone else. This was what had screwed with his head, and clearly he needed healing. If Harry thought he was riding a roller coaster, it couldn't be worse than Neville's. "What did she do, Neville? What did that bitch do?"

Neville looked at Harry at the invective in his voice. He seemed to relax minutely as he realized Harry supported him. His voice was breathy, but he spoke. "She put me under, Harry. She used the

Imperius, and then she made me do nothing. There was nothing to fight; I just lay there and ... Harry, I couldn't think. But she didn't hurt me. There was nothing to fight." Neville choked and pressed his hands to his face, uncaring of the blood. "You know, you've hit that goddamn state of puberty. Anything makes you hard, right?"

Harry swallowed. The question would have made him uncomfortable if he hadn't been able to follow what he meant. "She ... God, Neville, she didn't ..."

"It didn't hurt, Harry." Neville spat. "I didn't have a fucking clue. I did nothing because she didn't make me do anything. I couldn't think, couldn't panic. She licked blood off the back of my neck, and I did nothing. She –" Neville choked off another sob, and then looked furiously back at Harry. The blood on his face made his look firmer, but Harry finally knew, finally understood, and he met Neville's heat with his own level stare.

"She raped you." Harry finished. "God, Neville, why didn't you say anything?"

Neville dismissed it with a gesture and looked away, back to the cold water. "What would I say? I was stupid; I shouldn't have flouted the wards. I should have fought back, something when she got me. I'm pathetic. I was stupid, and I paid the price."

Harry snarled, "Neville, that's the stupidest thing I've heard from you, and that's saying something with the atrocious idiocy you've displayed for the last month." Neville flinched, and Harry angrily grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back against the wall, "Dammit Neville!" He growled. "It – was – not – your – fault. If stupidity deserved pain, do you know how many people would bleed each year? They'd die within minutes. Everyone is stupid at times, just like I ignored you for the last month, didn't bring up my concerns. Do I deserve to get hurt for it? Does Melanie deserve something like that for assuming it was that goddamn broom accident?" Neville was shaking his head slowly, not meeting Harry's eyes but he was listening, finally. "We're human. Just human, all right? We fuck up, but we deal."

Neville nodded slowly, and calmly noted, "I did a damn good job discouraging you from pressing the point about what was wrong, Harry."

"Isn't that the same basic thing as Melanie assuming you always bugger flying? Isn't that same basic thing as Bellatrix using the Imperius? Something will always blind us, and sometimes it's too much. I should have seen past your stupidity. You should have fought the damn spell. Well, sometimes we just can't." Harry's voice fell, became soft and pleading. "Sometimes we can't, Neville. Are you to be blamed for not being capable of fighting it? Am I to be blamed for caving before your defence?"

"No." Neville whispered. "It just hurt, Harry. It hurt. She broke my wand, Harry. She released me as –as soon as she was finished, as soon as she'd made –made sure I finished, too. She was so damn pleased with herself." His arms wrapped around his chest and he bit his lip to stifle another sob. "And she took my wand and broke it in front of my face and then just left. Just ditched me, naked. I was scared she'd kill me there. Can you imagine? Dead, just like that. Naked, not having raised a hand to defend myself."

"They're called Unforgivable for a reason, Neville." Harry insisted. "Please. Neville, you need to tell your parents. They need to know."

"What good will it do?" Neville groused, but he wasn't looking at Harry and he'd tensed. He was scared again.

"Neville, you're hurt."

"She did nothing, and the cut is easy enough to heal. I healed the others."

"Neville, you know what I mean." Harry growled. "You're not this stupid. Wounds aren't all bloody cuts, and you know it."

"What do I tell them, Harry?" Neville asked brokenly. "They saw me the day it happened, and I didn't say anything. They didn't notice."

"How long does spell residue last, Neville?" Harry pointed out. "You know those numbers better than me. How likely was it to them to think you'd been attacked? It wasn't immediately after, or you couldn't have diverted them. You'd also been hurt; all of them just thought you had that concussion. Head injuries, as you showed me rather properly," Harry wryly pointed out, "are messy, they cause dizziness, distraction ... I'll bet the symptoms were mistaken, weren't they?"

"Yes," Neville whispered, "yes, they were. I couldn't tell myself. Mum thought I was distraught over my wand, and dad thought it was all the concussion." Neville barked a thin laugh. "I'd fallen over twenty damn metres. I think that's a damn miserable concussion."

"Twenty metres?" Harry gaped. "Neville—"

"It was branches all the way down, Harry." Neville calmly pointed out. "It broke my fall. I hit my head on one of the branches; the blood was more of a scrape from the bark."

Harry sighed, and shook his head. "Neville, please."

"Alright." Harry looked up quickly. It was unexpected for him to cave like that, but his voice was as defeated as his posture. "Fine, I'll tell them. You want me to write a letter or something?"

Harry snorted; he couldn't help it. "Oh, I can just see your mother getting that letter."

Neville chuckled as he leaned over to turn off the shower. "That would go over rather well." He quipped weakly, warmly. He flinched as he tried to use his right hand, and switched to reaching through the frigid spray with his left. As the water turned off, he shivered and turned to grab his wand, casting a quick drying spell, and then a warming spell. His shivers stopped, and he glanced at Harry before turning his attention to his cut wrist. A negligent wave vanished the razor from the floor without him even looking at it, and then he conjured a small cloth to clean up the wound; reaching through the spray had washed off his hand. Small pink marks edged around it, a bit above and below – cuts already healed.

Harry smiled weakly, trying to ignore them. “Neville, you still have blood on your face. Maybe you should just finish your shower – or at least rinse your face, or you’re going to terrify someone. We can just bandage your wrist; there’s a first aid kit somewhere in here. That’s a deep cut – if you miss something, it’ll come back to bite you.”

Neville idly touched his face and came away with the diluted, tacky blood. He grimaced and nodded; Harry turned and jogged to the sinks and returned quickly with the kit; he didn’t want to leave Neville alone long. The shower had turned back on, and steam had immediately renewed itself; he’d turned it on warm, which was a good sign. It wasn’t on long, though, only long enough for a rinse and then it was off again, and when Neville pulled open the curtain, he was completely dry again, and Harry had already fished out what was needed to wrap his wrist.

Despite the lack of proper clothes, Harry didn’t want to dawdle and Neville wasn’t fighting him. Alongside the matter, it was still before eight on a weekend; only the Ravenclaws would really be up. Wearing their pyjama trousers and bathrobes, however, was mildly embarrassing. Harry attempted his basic transfiguration and only managed to change it into something a little more refined, and several shades darker, making the aqua look far more green than before. He ignored the colour, and felt a twinge when Neville’s looked almost indistinguishable from a dark orange casual set of robes. Neville merely shrugged, however and his troubled gaze waited on him to lead the way out. Harry sighed and nodded. They needed to go.

It was a lot easier said than done. With the boy’s showers at the base of their tower, and the common room between them and outside, Harry and Neville attracted attention when they came out; Lavender, sitting stiffly in the midst of a group of older girls made the culprit clear. When they came out, she immediately stiffened and raised her voice to call out.

“Oh, that makes things much clearer, Neville. I’d thought you were only a whore, but I guess you were just playing with the girls for a few weeks to see if they were any better a lay than Potter. Forgive me; I’ll be sure to tell Draco your price.”

Neville jerked against Harry's grip on his wrist, and then flinched as it aggravated the cut. Harry growled at Lavender, promising to visit proper revenge on her later, but he simply pulled on Neville's arm again and tugged him out the portrait hole.

"Neville, just leave the little hussy alone. She's only trying to make herself feel better, and by Merlin if you do something to her without first getting my help, I will hurt you."

Neville turned to him, ready to complain until Harry's addendum registered. His face calmed, curious, and then he smiled vindictively. "Sorry. I should remember that I can ask you for help now that I'm not being stupid."

"You should." Harry scolded. "We're still going to the Headmaster's office."

Neville's face fell, and he mock whined. "Harry ..." There wasn't quite as much whine as there should have been, but there was a real layer of fear. Harry tightened his grip on his hand, and continued to pull him along through the deserted corridors. He only vaguely remembered where the Headmaster's office was. He hesitated, and then corrected himself. He didn't know where it was, but he did know where McGonagall's was, and she had a floo, not to mention they were already nearby.

"Harry ..." Neville began to ask, and then sighed as Harry changed direction. "Harry, McGonagall still wants to eat my organs for supper after picking all those fights, and skipping detention. Are you really sure you want to haul me over there?"

"Neville, shut up." Harry scolded. "She didn't know; something tells me you'll either lose some detentions or have the actual detention become a lot easier after this."

Neville sighed, but didn't argue. He was either just being quiet, or he agreed. Harry wasn't up to pressing the matter at the moment, and they arrived at her office soon thereafter. Harry knocked on the door

and then waited, as he knew he'd have to. She might not be up, and while the knock would wake her, it still might be several minutes.

He was correct, and waited in silence until she opened the door, wrapped tightly in her own tartan dressing robe. Finding Harry and Neville standing outside, she immediately looked them over for signs of a fight, and, finding none – Neville's bandaged wrist was hidden under his sleeve – she let them in and then turned to sit herself behind her desk.

"Well, Mr. Potter. Mr. Longbottom. I'm surprised to find you both here agreeably and without having picked a fight, unlike the last month of association. What brings you here?"

"Professor McGonagall, we need to speak to Dumbledore." Harry offered. Neville had made it clear he had no intentions of speaking; apparently without holding onto his shame, he had either gone to silent and unobtrusive or defaulted back to normal. It was a relief; the world had stopped swinging wildly around him and he had ground level beneath his feet. He could do this.

"Why do you need to speak with Dumbledore?"

Harry looked to Neville immediately, and McGonagall followed his gaze. Neville couldn't look at her, but finally, quietly offered, "I need to contact my parents in person. There's ... something I need to tell them."

McGonagall huffed quietly. "I suppose you mean a matter of importance, as you are unlikely to come to me frivolously. Do you want to floo them?"

"If they could come here?" Harry asked. "I think ... it'd be best to talk to them face to face." A short look at Neville confirmed it, and when he looked back McGonagall was watching them both with disbelief. She shook it off and nodded.

"Very well. I'll call them, if you'll give me a minute. Dumbledore can be informed later; I have authority. Umbridge can't debate a student's request to see their parents."

Harry and Neville both nodded, and watched as McGonagall tossed the floo powder into the fire, calling the Longbottom manor. It was a tense few minutes; Harry's mind was running in circles, and Neville's hands were fidgeting with his transfigured robe. Finally, McGonagall pulled back, and the fire stayed green. Alice and Frank shortly tumbled out, and coming through behind them was James and Lily – Harry's parents. They had probably been visiting, as they tended to. Harry thought about it for a moment, and it quickly made sense: James, Frank and Alice always tried to get either Valentine's or the day before or after off, as they were married. It was a blessing that it was today.

"Neville?" Alice asked immediately. She sighed. "Minerva, did he get into another fight?"

Harry and Neville both flinched, and looked to each other. Minerva was shaking her head, but Neville spoke first; he was still looking at Harry, though, and Harry hadn't picked out the reason yet.

"No, mum. I asked her to floo you because I need to tell you something – privately." The last was another firm look at Harry, and Harry finally caught on and nodded. He wanted the Chamber of Secrets. Technically they weren't not allowed inside; hopefully neither set of parents would point it out.

Of course, their exchange had garnered plenty of attention and it was James who finally asked, "Would you like to talk about it here, or do you have somewhere else in mind?" True Marauder reasoning.

Neville nodded slowly, and Harry bit his lip before looking up at his father. James had tight lines beside his eyes, but he was more curious than anything right now - which would either change, or strengthen after Harry made a point of asking permission.

"I'd actually like to talk in the Chamber of Secrets, Professor McGonagall."

Minerva's eyebrows jumped towards her hairline, and Alice made a small, startled sound. James frowned.

"Is it safe?" He asked.

Harry shuffled a moment, debating whether to lie or not, and then settled for a half-truth. "Well, I've been down there before and never had any problems. It's useful for getting time to myself without fear of being interrupted at a bad time." He raised his eyes to his father's and quirked an eyebrow. Hopefully he'd get the hint.

James' eyebrows rose again, and he gave a small 'Oh,' Lily sent a suspicious look between her husband and son, and then sighed as well, tossing the wry look at Alice. The silent communication shortly dissolved into nearly invisible giggles on the women's part. Minerva frowned, and Frank noticed partially to escape his wife's hilarity.

"I suspect letting you in on the joke wouldn't be best here, but if wanted to visit us later I might be able to discuss it with you."

Minerva nodded slowly, and then sighed. "I suppose there are no rules against you talking in whatever part of the castle you desire. Since the Chamber has been looked over, it is most likely no danger, and thus I will not say a word for or against your choice. I do hope this means you have calmed down, Neville." She gave him a level look and Neville smiled weakly back.

"It does, ma'am. I ... might tell you later, or let my parents share it. It's just ..." he looked aside, and didn't finish, but Harry grabbed his shoulder and then nodded to Minerva, leading the way out of her office and through the mostly deserted halls. This early on a weekend was not usually popular with the students. Even the Ravenclaws would be holed up studying rather than wandering about.

Neither of their parents were very interested in asking questions as they walked, apparently watching the two of them leading the way, Neville staying a step behind Harry, who was paying more attention to getting them down without being seen than he was to considering talking. Thus was the walk silent but quick, and soon enough they were in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and Harry nervously glanced at the new audience and eyed the tap. His nervousness made it difficult for him to get into the right attitude for speaking parseltongue; his

false starts made Neville laugh nervously, and finally his irritation brought on the sibilant tongue and the way opened. Once it was free, Harry stepped back with a nervous smile.

"The pipe's clean. I'll go down last, all right? Neville, do you want the honour of checking for rats?" Harry teased. Neville stuck out his tongue, and stepped to the pipe to slide down. Frank and Alice went next, and then Lily. Harry was awkwardly aware of it just being himself and his father, and watched James cautiously. He hadn't written the usual letters for two weeks. James just watched him for the long minute until Harry was sure his mother would be clear and coughed lightly to clear his throat.

"Harry ..." James started awkward, but he shook his head and stopped himself, crouching at the pipe to simply slide down without another word. Harry watched him go, and awkwardly admitted that he likely would have to explain himself to his father. He almost wished that James might get lost in the enormity of Neville's problem, and felt immediately ashamed. But he couldn't deny the vague wish.

Neville's voice drifted up the pipe, indistinguishable after the distance, but easily warning enough that he was taking his sweet time and should be down there. Harry sat down and slid. Enough procrastination. He wasn't the one who'd been hurt.

A/N: Well, there we go. Problem solved-ish. Feel better? Was that really surprising? You can breath now, and things will be moving on and, well, I suspect the general tone will be going a tad downhill. Only a tad, but really. You didn't expect a happy war, now did you? And I'll even give you Quidditch and pranks in between.

Thank you for reading, please review?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Thirty-nine

As it turned out, James hadn't said another word to Harry during that visit, and he left without dealing with his son's 'questionable' friends. Fortunately, his presence did ease Neville's mind a lot, making Harry agreeable to putting up with it. His parents had easily reassured him of the same things Harry had: It was not his fault, in any way.

It would make for an interesting encounter if any of them got their hands on Bellatrix, though.

Neville's attitude was a lot better when they came back out of the chamber, but conversely he'd become almost silent. He waved Harry off as he returned with his parents to McGonagall's office, and Harry smiled and told him he'd be in the library. Neville nodded a little too quickly and left, and Harry walked idly back up towards the tower. He wasn't sure how much longer his transfiguration would last, and he wanted to get some real clothes on. Walking through the common room, however, became a smidgeon of a challenge when Lavender bearded him immediately.

"Well, satisfied to have your boyfriend back?" She sneered. The entire common room fell silent to listen: Neville had become rather hot news. Harry smiled thinly back at Lavender and promised himself his revenge would be his and Neville's alone, although he might bring in Alan. Just for help with any potions.

"He's not my boyfriend, Lavender; he's just a friend. Just because you can't hang out with someone without bedding them isn't my problem. Excuse me." Harry brushed past her, and she gasped and grabbed his arm, spinning him to face her again. In that time, Harry saw that his friends were listening just as hard as the rest of them.

"Don't you dare judge me, Potter! If you think he's worth anything, you're wrong. He's nothing but a whore, and not a very good one." She scathed.

Harry was still smiling; it was unnerving her terribly. She must have been smarter than he gave her credit for. "Just because you're not a good enough lay to keep a guy's interest isn't his fault. And he won't

be bothering you again, Lavender, so back off. I have better things to do."

Harry forcibly pulled out of her grasp and turned to stalk back up the stairs to his dorm, delving into his trunk to change. He pulled out his bag, grabbed a few books to read, shut his own and then went to open Neville's trunk. There was a failsafe in each of their trunks that their parents had put in, so Harry knew he could get in if he had to, although it would be obvious that it had been done. Surprisingly, however, Harry knew the locking spell Neville had used and opened it easily. His trunk was a mess, tumbled everywhere without care, but Harry found a set of clothes to put in his bag. Finished, he turned to address Ron and Hermione, who had been waiting patiently since halfway through his search. When he turned, Hermione spoke first.

"If you could get into his trunk, why didn't you do so earlier?"

Harry sighed. "First, he doesn't usually use such a simple spell to lock his trunk; he was out of it this morning. Second, it's very rude. Third, I already know he doesn't keep a journal or a diary, so I wouldn't have found the reason there anyways. He wouldn't have written it down."

"But you've figured it out?" Hermione's voice broke.

Harry smiled weakly. "Yeah. But Hermione, it's his to tell."

"But he doesn't just hate us?" She was starting to cry again. Harry fidgeted awkwardly. Crying women were blackmail, and it didn't matter how old they were. It was worse when it was someone your age, though. Frank and James had had to deal when Alice and Lily teared up, but now it was Hermione and Ron was terrible about that sort of thing, leaving Harry responsible.

Harry sat awkwardly beside her and sighed. "No, he doesn't hate you Hermione. He was just scared. He was over-reacting. He doesn't hate you at all. He – he just needs to get over this first." Harry wondered how badly Neville had felt that he had pushed Hermione away, had broken her gift. This didn't make any sense, and a part of him wished desperately to go to the library and find Alan. Alan either

made things make sense, or made it feel like it was all right that he didn't understand if Alan didn't either.

Hermione's crying faded slightly, and she huffed. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should go find Hannah and Susan. I'm probably making you hideously uncomfortable."

That's about the sum of it, Harry thought, but you didn't say that to a girl in tears. "It's alright. I'm heading to the library myself."

Hermione looked at him sidelong. "To see the Slytherins again?" She asked carefully.

Harry flinched, but then forced himself to relax. She was only curious. No more faking it. "Yeah, I've been friends with Prince since second year." There. Said. Hermione and Ron were now gaping at him.

"You two picked fights nearly monthly third year!" Ron gaped.

Harry shrugged. "It was fun. See you."

Ron and Hermione stared after him as he breezed out of the dorm, and down through the common room. Silence spread around him, but he walked too quickly for any of them to catch his attention, and was out the door.

The library, true to about noon, was only mildly crowded, and Harry's stomach grumbled quietly about the lack of food. He found the table easily, and Alan wasn't there. It was actually Stephanie and her girls, and Harry faltered, ready to leave, when Stephanie called out.

"Hey, Potter! Prince is sitting elsewhere. He wanted to talk to you about some word that'd filtered through the grapevine since morning. You know where, he said."

Harry turned and smiled. "Thank you, Rothschild." He called; he only knew her by name, but Alan had told him Stephanie hung out with the Head Girl and several others, so it must be her who spoke. The laughter behind him didn't help, but it was done and he wanted to catch Alan.

Harry could only smile when he found Alan sitting at the table in the dark corner, alone and obviously irritated. He looked up, annoyed, when Harry came up, but his face cleared and he smiled thinly upon recognizing him, waving silently at the seat across from himself. Harry sat comfortably, but Alan immediately shut his book and fixed him with a firm look and a bald tone.

"Harry, word travels fast. I got worried when it made the rounds: Neville slept with Lavender, woke up and beat her, and then you hauled him through the Common Room not ten minutes later and weren't seen for hours. I have it on good authority each of those happened, so I won't discount it, but I'm thinking it's one Hell of a story."

Harry sighed and ran his hand over his face. Alan's dry tone meant he wasn't leaving without an answer. "Alan, most of that's Neville's to tell. But I found out why he was so antagonistic and it makes sense. He was being overly defensive, over-compensating. I'm sure he'll tell you once he's back here, but I won't tell his story unless he asks it of me."

Alan tilted his head to the side, and then sighed. "At least tell me if you know the first parts to be true so I can try and fix it."

Harry winced. "Can't fix it when it's true. He slept with her, I woke them and then he threw her out and slapped her once when she kept calling him a whore, chasing her out of the dorm."

Alan swore under his breath, and Harry leaned back and sighed. It was simply silence for several long minutes, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Harry felt surprisingly calm for what he'd found out, but he guessed that it was just that there was a clear enemy, something tangible to wrap his mind around to understand the events even only in a twisted sense ... Harry sighed calmly and turned back to Alan. "Where are the others?" Alan rarely was allowed to go somewhere alone anymore.

"They're around. Blaise had detention again, Daphne, Tracey and Theodore had an assignment to check out in the Greenhouses, and I

think Lucille and Salvador decided to check out a broom closet or two. They're welcome to it. Stephanie's girls are keeping a watch on the perimeter."

Harry frowned. "Would they keep out Neville if he tried to come find me?"

Alan frowned in turn. "Possibly. I'd go check, but then they'll just look farther – Ah, no. Neville's apparently fine at evading them. I should have a word with her about that." Alan unfolded easily from his chair, nodded at Harry and walked away. Harry nodded as he went, and turned and walked over to Neville. He felt his breath catch as Neville gave him a tormented look.

"Neville ... is everything alright?"

Neville gave a bitter little laugh, and then shook his head. "No, it's ... as fine as it gets. Just ... I'm not sure I can face anybody I knew."

Harry blinked for a moment, and then caught on. "Oh. You ... er, that's going to be a tough one, Neville."

Neville leaned against the bookshelf and nodded solemnly.

Harry paused and tried to think. This was looking complicated. "Neville ... I think everyone would just be happy to see you acting normal again, honestly. Or – or you know, as normal as we get. Hanging out with your old friends. You don't have to be perfect, and it's not going to be the same, but we know that, Neville. You've kinda forced it down our throats." Neville flinched, and Harry reached over and grabbed his shoulder. "Neville, please. Just try. Everyone knows something is wrong, and you don't have to talk. Just ... accept it and move on. Come back. Please."

"I can't face it, Harry."

Harry frowned, and grabbed Neville's arm again. He blinked to find the bandage still there; he hadn't realized Neville hadn't gotten his mother to heal it. Quickly, Harry pulled his sleeve up and looked at it: blood was already seeping through. Harry struggled not to growl.

“Neville,” he began. Looking up, Neville clearly didn’t own up to it, and Harry just sighed. “Fine. Fine.” Harry let go of his wrist and stalked back to the table. Alan had returned, and looked at him oddly. Harry didn’t react, just grabbed his bag and spoke when he was halfway back to where Neville stood. “I’m taking Neville to the hospital wing for a moment. Feel free to tag along.”

Neville immediately blanched. “Harry, I don’t need to –“

“You had the option to ask your mother to heal your wrist, Neville, but it’s bled through the bandage now. If you won’t take care of yourself, I’ll do it for you. We’re going. End of story. Now you can either walk, or be dragged. Pick one.”

Neville shut his mouth, paused for a moment and then sighed. He followed Harry sullenly, but flinched minutely away from Alan when Alan jogged to catch up with them. Alan eyed him for a moment and glanced between Harry and Neville before speaking up. Harry led easily, simply listening without watching.

“So … can I ask what happened to your wrist?”

Neville didn’t answer.

“Will I get more of an answer if I ask what happened period?”

Silence again.

“What was you mother doing at Hogwarts?”

“Harry insisted.” His tone was sullen.

“Why?”

“Because I obviously can’t take care of myself, that’s what.”

“You’ve done a smashing job for the last month.” Alan drawled, and then sighed. “Neville. I just want to understand. I don’t want to be

angry with you; something big clearly happened. I'm just wondering what could have preceded such a dramatic change."

"Bellatrix Lestrange." Neville shot.

Alan fell dead silent, and after a moment Harry glanced back. Alan was staring straight ahead with a deathly blank face, his eyes half-closed. He was thinking hard; Harry suspected Neville wouldn't have to say much else for Alan to understand how bad the trauma had been, albeit without precise context. The rest of the walk was silent, but Neville was giving Alan considering looks most of the way, and he no longer seemed so scared.

However, Madam Pomfrey wasn't nearly so easily quelled. Harry hadn't considered that she would become overwhelming when she saw that Neville had tried to kill himself. She immediately went into a deep lecture that Harry struggled to knock her out of. Finally, he yelled at her to go talk to Professor McGonagall; Harry knew the Longbottoms had decided to explain what had happened to her, to alleviate Neville's detentions. Neville had silently bowed to his parents' decision without fighting it. When Madam Pomfrey came back out, she insisted upon doing a full scan. Thankfully, it found little other than the bandage, just a few light bruises and a faint bite mark, all of which were easily attributed to the activities of the night before. The month since had erased all the traces. There wasn't much more to be determined before Pomfrey easily healed the cut and the rest, and then let him go with an admonition to be careful and keep out of trouble. Her eyes were sad, but Neville was grateful to leave, after making use of the privacy screens to change.

Alan quietly asked if either of them were hungry. Neville predictably wasn't, but Harry certainly was. Alan eyed them both for a moment, and then lead the way down to the kitchens.

They managed to hide fairly well for the rest of the day. Alan and Harry traversed most of the castle, Neville tagging silently along, watching Harry interact openly and easily with Alan in the halls. His expression was tight; clearly, he regretted everything he'd missed. Finally, however, it was supper or at least the earliest vestiges of it, and Neville spoke up for the first time.

"Harry, we should eat. I ... I need to work on trying to get at least some of my homework done. I haven't got any of it done yet."

Harry smiled back at him and nodded. "Sure. You want to eat in the Great Hall?"

Neville shrugged. "I'll have to sometime. Might as well get it over with."

Alan grinned. "It's a weekend and regular day. You want to eat at the Slytherin table?"

Neville blanched; Harry couldn't think why for a moment, and then remembered: Draco. Alan's face darkened at the same time as Harry's, and Alan easily reassured him.

"If Draco puts his face near my group he'll eat his wand, Neville. Come sit with us." It wasn't so much an invitation as an order. Neville subsided and followed meekly.

Alan was quite correct, however. Draco came in with a saunter, saw Neville and Harry eating with Alan, Blaise, Salvador and Lucille and immediately pouted. He said not one word within the hearing of the group, sitting almost ridiculously far away. Neville ignored the stares with the ease he'd used for the last few months, but his hands twitched slightly and his face was too blank, a deep line marring his forehead in stress. Blaise sighed.

"Neville, do you want to go running sometime? We could probably find some free time during Easter break to get out after curfew, all of us."

Neville raised his eyebrow. Lucille and Salvador had heard all of the exchange, but only glanced over and then turned back to their conversation without giving it a second thought. Blaise smiled superiorly.

"Slytherins keep each other's secrets. Would you like to? You're really stressed."

Neville sighed, and then nodded silently. He paused after a moment and whispered, "I'm sorry, Blaise."

Blaise waved it off. "I was pressing you when you didn't want to talk. You fought back. It's fine, just don't do it again now that it's dealt with." He paused and lowered his voice. "What was wrong, Neville?"

Neville glanced fearfully around, but he was seated between Blaise and Harry, across from Alan and Lucille. Three seats away from Alan, it was Theodore, and beside Blaise was Salvador. No one was within three seats of the couple. No one outside of Alan's hands would overhear. Harry held his breath, waiting, hoping ... he needed to accept it; it wasn't going to change just because he didn't like it. He needed to share the burden.

"I was being foolish, flying outside of the wards. Bellatrix hexed me out of the sky. I got a concussion falling, and she —" He faltered and coloured, unable to look at them. "She tortured me. Didn't leave a mark, but she did. I couldn't — she had me quiescent, under the Imperius." He awkwardly shrugged. "I was ashamed. I felt ... used. I couldn't face the people I knew, so I changed and cut myself off. The Patils are such airheads they wouldn't ask questions, wouldn't notice. I was overcompensating. I shouldn't have."

Blaise shook his head and gently rested his hand on Neville's shoulder. "Shit, no wonder you were fucked up." Neville tensed at the phrase, and Blaise took his hand away, and sighed. "Just ... don't cut yourself off again, okay?" His face said there was more he couldn't say, and Neville just nodded silently. Lucille and Salvador's conversation had become stilted; they'd overheard. Neville didn't look at anyone, simply burying his head in his arms on the table. Alan looked across at Harry, and Harry sighed before purposefully asking,

"Do you want to help me get Lavender to shut her filthy mouth?"

Blaise's eyes gleamed. "Is she being a bitch about the one-night-stand?"

"Yes."

Blaise's grin was feral. "Would you leave it to me?"

"You can't have all of it, Blaise!" Alan growled.

"Alan?" Lucille asked delicately. "May I annihilate any reputation she wants to maintain? You can still attack her, but I want my share."

Alan merely nodded, and she happily returned to talking with Salvador. Neville had turned his head to watch her in mild surprise, and after that he sat up and added his own opinion. Homework was put off for a few more minutes as they planned.

Getting up from the table, Neville was surprisingly in a relatively better mood. Harry gave him a curious smile as he walked next to him for the first time that day, rather than a few steps behind, and Neville gave a sad smile back, but his eyes were dancing beneath the curtain of sadness.

"I never thought Slytherins would make such good friends. I think it will be entertaining the next few weeks and I won't have to do anything but catch up on my homework."

Harry smirked, and gently punched Neville's shoulder – he was too tall for Harry to put his arm around his shoulders, which he would have preferred. "Yeah, well I'm already tired of Lavender's talking and I've only crossed the common room twice." Neville blanched. "It's alright, Neville. If you bring the Twins in, they'll keep her out of your hair. They need to test a few products again anyways."

Neville's face grew pensive, and Harry fell silent, letting him think and squashing his own unease. He wondered how much better the fun little roller coaster was going to get over the next few weeks: it was better than it had been, but it seemed Neville was still having a few ups and downs that worried Harry. Maybe he was being oversensitive.

"I think I should tell them: the twins, Ron, and Hermione. Melanie ..." Neville shook his head. "God, I am such a mess."

"Well at least you weren't the one to make it. Everyone was trying to tell me you were just 'growing up'. It was the biggest load of hogwash I'd heard since Sirius tried to pass off the mess in the kitchen when he attempted to cook as an experimental potion."

Neville gave a choked little laugh, but fell silent as they came to the portrait hole. Harry touched his arm again, "Lavender's still at supper, far as I know, along with Parvati and Sophie. Unfortunately, I think the twins and them all are there too."

Neville nodded. "I'll just get started on my homework then." He gave Harry a wry smile. "Aren't you a bit behind as well?"

Harry coloured. "Uh, yeah. Whoops." He laughed as Neville shook his head slowly, and walked companionably to get the books and parchment, bringing them back down to the chairs before the fire. Slowly, however, the camaraderie faded as Neville became increasingly frustrated as he looked through the books frantically, reading far more often than he was writing. All Harry had left to do was polish his essay for Astronomy, and clean up his Transfiguration essay – his writing for that one had been atrocious, but he'd been staring at Neville lip-locked with Parvati at the time. It was better than Hermione's, which had developed a large ink stain when she'd growled for almost a full minute.

Either way, Harry was waiting as Neville struggled through his Arithmancy text, and the common room slowly filled. Most people stared for a short moment, and then hurried off or found a seat in the corner distractedly beginning to talk amongst themselves. Harry held onto the hope that the twins, Ron, or Hermione would come up first; Hell, even Lee Jordan would be decent. He just wanted a buffer before Lavender came in.

He almost got his wish. Hermione and Lavender came in almost side-by-side, sparing each other venomous looks, Ginny's wand tracking Lavender's back almost outside her notice. It seemed to be keeping her silent at least, as Ginny had the backup of Melanie and Nanna, and Harry thought he glimpsed Dillan outside the door. Of course, once the portrait hole shut, Lavender scanned the room and smiled

thinly at Neville, sitting bent over his parchment. Her expression didn't even fade at Harry sitting nearby.

"Neville! Why, it's smashing to see you. Have you been avoiding me all day, I—"

Harry's wand lined up with her face stopped her in her tracks, Harry standing deceptively loosely in her way. Her voice had sent a tremor down Neville's back, and he'd stiffened, stopping in mid-stroke on his writing. Harry wasn't putting up with this.

"Lavender. Lovely to see you dressed. Surely you can look elsewhere for satisfaction. I've heard you've run the gamut from seventh through fourth year, and all four houses, so leave Neville the Hell alone."

Her expression wanted to argue, but Ginny spoke up. "Hey Lavender, there's been talk you'll do the girls too. Didn't Draco turn you down in December? Wonder what stopped him."

Harry hadn't thought she could sound so scathing. She'd scared the Hell out of her brothers, though, who had just come through the door. The common room was staring at the array, apparently flustered at the shift in attitude. Everyone was suddenly defending Neville, and he wasn't fighting his re-absorption. He hadn't even looked up.

Finally, Lavender gave, huffing with colour bright in her cheeks, and turning back to join a betrayed looking Parvati. Ginny watched Harry curiously, and then came to gently sit on the floor between Harry's chair and Neville's, watching the brown-haired boy curiously. Slowly, the rest of their group - Hermione and Ron, the twins, and a reluctant Melanie and Nanna – found places around them, pulling up chairs and crouching on the floor. Neville stiffened in place, but Harry knew he couldn't make this any easier. Finally, as they settled, the twins both cast an area privacy charm. Neville quietly flipped a page in his book, seemingly ignoring his audience but Harry thought he was checking the charm. Finally, he sighed and, without looking up, quietly admitted everything.

"I'm sorry I made such a mess since break ended, and I'm sorry I pulled away. I was scared, and ashamed. The broom accident wasn't

an accident. I was outside the wards and someone hexed my broom. I got the concussion falling, but ... but I – I was ... I was hurt. By Bellatrix Lestrange. She – She tortured me, took ... took advantage of me, I – you might say, but ... she didn't leave a mark. She healed anything she did that wasn't caused by the fall, so no one noticed and I – I couldn't tell anyone. Couldn't admit it. I felt filthy, stupid, and couldn't stomach facing someone who knew me and might notice so I pulled away and I hurt all of us. I hurt myself, and I hurt my real friends. I'm sorry." He finished in a whisper. He hadn't looked up once. Harry felt the pain grind against his chest again, and wished it would all be over.

"Why play around?" Hermione asked tonelessly. "What was the point in playing with the Patils? With Lavender?"

Neville flinched under her voice. Harry bristled, but Neville knew him too well. He looked up and shook his head slightly at Harry. "No, I ... I thought maybe I could – could bury the memories. They were stupid enough to fall into my lap in moments, and they didn't notice or didn't care that I was manipulating them. Lavender ..." He chuckled breathlessly. "We were both playing the same damn game, I guess, trying to manipulate each other. We both got burned." He shrugged. "I don't want to do any of that again. I was wrong; I was over-compensating. I'm sorry, to all of you. I didn't ... I was stupid. I thought it would hurt less."

Neville had looked down again, curling back in upon himself in the chair, speaking in a broken whisper. He couldn't seem to snap out of it. Harry tore his eyes away and clinically catalogued the reactions, trying to find any that were hostile. There were none. The twins looked torn between fury and dismay; Ron was horrified, startled. Ginny, who must have spoken with Blaise since he was informed, was sad. Nanna and Melanie both were horrified and confused, but Harry thought Melanie might be feeling guilty; she, after all, had been there right after. She had lauded his distress as a broom accident, as torn pride. Harry would try and get Ginny to comfort her; he didn't think Neville could handle it right then.

Finally, Harry forced himself to look, really look, at Hermione. Her face was a study of calm; remarkably similar to Neville's when he

didn't want anyone intruding. But he'd learned to read Alan and Blaise over three years. Hermione couldn't keep her emotions as tightly as they: he could guess that she was hurt, betrayed, but she also seemed, predictably, horrified, dismayed, and scared. Even a thread of guilt wormed through her eyes, and Harry finally coughed, turning all eyes to him.

"I just found out this morning. That's why we ran through so early; Neville told his parents, and McGonagall and Pomfrey of the staff at least know. As does Alan and his coterie. I think he's been hurt enough, what with Lavender and Draco on his case."

Everyone but Hermione nodded. She still looked lost in thought, in hurt and guilt and confusion. Neville looked around quietly at the agreement and while his eyes lingered with pain on Hermione's face, he looked down before she came back to herself enough to notice, returning silently to struggling through his homework. The twins lingered for a moment before shifting away, talking quietly and eyeing Lavender vindictively. Ron wandered up to the dorms, looking lost, and Melanie, Ginny, and Nanna similarly wandered off. Hermione remained where she was, watching her hands and looking lost.

Harry awkwardly remained for a while, but the plotting cast to the twins eyes was grating on his desire to get at Lavender himself so he took a moment to walk over and scold them, holding them off for a week to let him get his revenge. He directed them to plan with the Slytherins, and, turning back to the chairs by the fireplace, Harry felt a twinge. Hermione had left, and Neville was alone, glaring down at his textbooks and parchment. It must have pinched to struggle so. Harry wandered back over; loathe leaving Neville alone now that he had his friend back. He'd barely sat when Hermione trotted back down the stairs of the girl's dormitory, her arms full of books. Neville was as surprised as Harry when she set the load down on the table next to Neville's. She sat across from him, on a completely separate chair, but stubbornly she pulled a sheaf of parchment off the stack and thrust it at Neville. Neville could only blink blankly.

Hermione finally huffed. "They're my History notes. You didn't take any, and I – I noticed you were at a loss. So here. They're from the

last class, for the essay you're working on. I'm not giving you them for next week, though. You have to take your own. But ..."

Neville watched her with tormented eyes, but he gently murmured a thank you before returning to his essay. A tension Harry hadn't been able to pick out amidst his sadness eased out of his shoulders, and Neville returned to work with a small sad smile. Hermione herself went to work on her own essays. A lightness had moved back into her frame as well, and Harry finally leaned back and sighed pleasantly. Ron might still be fighting to make sense of the abrupt change, but he'd manage. Things were falling back together. He couldn't have hoped for more.

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Monday wasn't as challenging as Harry thought it would be. He'd heard from Alan once that he had a scary glare, but when no one intruded upon Neville now that he was within the group again, Harry finally felt that apparently Alan was right.

In most classes Harry shared with Neville they sat together, Neville quietly working beside him. He spoke rarely, and didn't volunteer to answer questions anymore; Harry suspected he was struggling with his work, even though he couldn't fathom why it had become difficult for him now that he was paying attention again.

The only class they shared where they didn't pair up together was Potions; Blaise had, Monday, swept over and pulled Neville down into the seat they'd shared previously, ushering Harry over to Alan much to Severus' dismay. Blaise had also apparently taken over as Neville's partner in Ancient Runes. Surprisingly, Anthony Goldstein had snagged Hermione as his partner, throwing the class into minor disarray as several people adjusted to the change: no one wanted to partner Alan, one of the Slytherin leaders, who had previously partnered Blaise. Daphne eventually left her group and partnered him. They laughed about the turmoil for days.

Wednesday, however, Neville got into another fight just outside of the library, putting Draco and Pansy into the hospital wing all evening. McGonagall was not pleased, although she didn't add any detention.

Since Neville's evenings were claimed into May, Harry wasn't surprised, although he wished he hadn't gotten into another fight. He'd been in class – Neville had a free period when the rest of them were in Care.

Either way, the week was probably as stressful as the weeks before but somehow it just weighed markedly less. There was just a strange lightness that held Harry through each day, knowing that the problem that had hung over everything like a storm cloud since they got back to school was at the very least known and hopefully healing. Having gotten Lavender Thursday evening made everything better. Using a few things that had been just sitting in a far corner of his trunk, and enlisting Alan's help on some of the spell work he was iffy about, Lavender was stalked by a large 'Grim' for the entire day, culminating in her dissolving into hysterics in the evening when it appeared and snuck up on her during dinner, stealing her bag and running with it. The bag was recovered at the base of the stairs up the North tower, and Harry went to bed very tired that evening. Animation spells were very draining, and he got through the next day of classes on grace and Neville's amused and repetitive pinches and prods keeping him from nodding off in the middle of class. His spell work was abysmal, but since he hadn't been doing well for five weeks, it wasn't too out of place. Seeing him nodding off in the common room after supper, Angelina banned him from the common room and ordered him to go to bed and get rested; he was not allowed to be tired for the Quidditch game in the morning. She became even more insistent that he go to sleep when he didn't argue.

Harry felt deeply relieved to stand on the turf of the Quidditch pitch, staring at a nice, fluffy sky and waiting for the whistle to split the crisp air. This was so easy. Admittedly, Neville had opted out to instead browse the library but Harry wasn't worried; Stephanie had promised to keep an eye on him, and from her considering look he wondered if maybe she wasn't going to commandeer him for something ...

The whistle blew, and Harry shot into the air. The wind, the game, the first crack of beater bat against bludger and he just let himself forget the last week, forget the Death Eaters and Dark Lords and he just played.

Of course, that might have been helped by Angelina's threat of bodily harm if he was distracted during the game.

It was Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff, and Harry felt no threat from the new seeker Hufflepuff had now that Cedric had graduated. Even so, he certainly wasn't cutting Summerby any slack; the boy was watching him a little too arrogantly for him to not want to teach him a few new tricks. Five minutes into the game, however, Summerby took off after a glint near the ground, and Harry immediately pulled up beside him. Fake out or not, he wasn't going to let him move without tailing him, and about halfway through the dive, Harry strongly suspected he was trying to get him to plough himself. Grinning, Harry pushed his broom for more speed to pull up neck to neck with Summerby, making the other seeker look more attentively at the ground. Harry grinned. His insistence was worrying the fourth year that he'd somehow missed something right in front of his nose and Harry glanced up – and pulled out of the dive as something sparkled past Zacharias Smith's ankles. He was betting Smith did not wear anklets, and as it moved past him in a streak of light, Harry pressed his broom for all it was worth. However, he didn't catch it. It disappeared behind the stands and was gone by the time he circled.

Idly, Harry just drifted, letting himself relax again as he scanned the pitch and tuned into the announcer. He almost laughed as Lee's voice moved quickly into a gleeful war cry; Angelina had just dodged around Smith so quickly she left him spinning in place. In his confusion, she scored easily against the keeper, bringing the score up to forty – zero. Frustrated, Zacharias brought them around but didn't manage to keep the quaffle long with the interference of the twins.

Harry laughed again, and turned to quickly scan the pitch again. Summerby was across from him, circling and watching intently. Harry simply smiled and scanned again, bumping his broom into his own circle as he listened to Lee.

"Bell makes another attempt on the Hufflepuff hoops, and – Oh, no such luck. Cadwallader takes the quaffle back up the pitch, proving a bit more adept at dodging the bludgers than Smith. It's looking a bit shaky, but Cadwallader passes off to Smith as Bell and Spinnet

attempt to box him in. Smith takes up the pitch again – Ouch, that's going to leave a mark. Smith drops the quaffle as he takes a bludger to the arm, but Cadwallader has done it again! Streaking up beneath him, the Hufflepuff chaser takes the quaffle out of Spinnet's grasp and makes a throw on Keeper Weasley and – Oh, he scores. Forty – ten, Gryffindor and Weasley tosses the quaffle back out to Johnson."

Harry stuck his tongue out at Summerby's tensely arrogant smile, and scanned again. Ron was probably going to be hacked off for a few minutes. He hated missing a quaffle. Either way –

Harry cut his thoughts off and in a burst of rather foolish self-importance took a nosedive almost vertical through the gathered players. His appearance sparked much interest; Hufflepuff didn't know what he was doing and Harry strongly suspected he didn't want to know what names Angelina was calling him right then, but he'd seen the snitch dancing around the players and didn't want to lose it. Seriously, straight down was the quickest option he had.

Unfortunately, he'd been high enough that by the time he was in range, the beaters had taken the time and care to line up their shots against him. Fred and George had admirably commandeered one loose bludger, but the other was shot clean into his path. Adrenaline pumping in his ears, Harry kept his angle a millisecond after he heard the impact, and then veered into a wide spiral, eyes locked on the snitch and trusting his peripheral vision to tell him where the bludger was. The wind whistled over his back, and then he pulled into an abrupt loop up as the snitch ducked into Katie's path. The chaser swore and dodged around it, and Harry shot through the pitch without a care for the plays he was disrupting. He came abreast of the snitch and then heard a shout,

"Hey Harry, watch your hat!"

Harry didn't bother to wonder about the phrasing and just ducked, hand over his head and bringing his broom into an exaggerated loop under Summerby. A fierce 'Oof!' and a thud told him Summerby, who had just come abreast him as well, was out of the picture and if he could just ... He reached over his head and back, grabbing the snitch

- and then remembering that the broom was supposed to remain under you, and not almost escape. Abruptly, Harry did an undignified curl and his broom twisted as he began to fall. Harry thrust the hand with the snitch down and released it as he grabbed his broom and straightened out, pulling back up with barely enough time to snag the snitch again. He had a moment of panic as it almost escaped him, barely registering the shrill whistle below marking the end of the game, but it paused and he secured his grip with an awkward motion. He landed with the rest of his team, pleased with his success. When Madam Hooch was finalizing it, Harry couldn't help but pipe up,

"Do we got bonus points because I had to catch the snitch twice?"

Madam Hooch snorted, and Angelina spluttered.

"How did you catch the snitch twice?"

Harry shrugged, mildly embarrassed. "Well, the first time I caught it I almost fell. I had to let it go to get back on my broom, but I caught it again, so it's all good."

Angelina rubbed her face with her hands, and Madam Hooch finally regained her aplomb and snorted. "Mr. Potter, you only need to catch the snitch once in a game, so you only ever get the normal points. Kindly keep that in mind. There is the skin memory, in case you forgot that."

Harry subsided without pressing the point. He did remember: it had just not been on his mind at the time and really, it was too much fun to not try. Angelina looked ready to slap him; he suspected it was only because he'd succeeded that she was forgiving his little dive into the Chasers. Besides, if the large amount of hilarity coming from the Slytherin stands was any indication ...

"Honestly, we won." Alicia groused. "Why's Slytherin laughing so damn much?"

Harry coloured. Ron didn't notice and frowned. "I don't know, some of them look out of sorts, but you've got half of them laughing their heads off."

Fred and George snickered, but didn't answer. Finally, Katie noticed and poked her finger into the nearest twin's chest.

"What is so funny? We need to know, so cut the inside joke and spill it. You know something."

"Oh, we don't know anything." The twin in question laughed, raising his hands in surrender. "But I think ickle Harry might have an inkling..."

As one, the Chasers and Keeper turned to fix Harry with a firm glare. Harry glared at the twins, but upon Angelina clearing her throat, Harry smiled awkwardly.

"I'm thinking my friends are having a little fun with my falling-off-my-broom stunt, is all. Don't worry, the Quidditch team is probably all cowed; it's just the rest of them probably think it's ruddy hilarious."

"Friends?" Katie queried, but Angelina rode over her.

"Are they finding it funny you nearly got hurt?"

Harry's amusement simmered and he straightened to frown at Angelina. "No, they don't think it's funny I was in danger, just that I was almost falling off when I'm a natural flier. Obviously I got back on; I just probably looked a right pillock while doing so. And yes, Katie, they're my friends. I thought that pretty much made the rounds already?"

Angelina gaped a moment, and then shook her head. "Say what? You're friends with the Slytherins?" Katie couldn't seem to speak, and Ron just looked a little left out; apparently he'd been hoping he was seeing things. As such, Harry answered to Ron.

"Yes, I'm friends with Alan Prince and his half of the house. Unfortunately, that doesn't include the Quidditch team, especially since he got kicked off it. Everything's peachy, really."

Angelina blinked again, and then shook her head. "Alright, whatever. It doesn't have a thing to do with your performance, right?"

Harry smiled. "It won't change a thing in how I play, and wouldn't even if he were still on the team. We've been friends since second year; I play fine against him. He'd never let me live it down if I went easy on him. Really Johnson," Harry tutted, "we're male."

Angelina muttered something derogatory about men and where they keep their brains before she just spun around and ordered the team back to the dressing rooms. Harry just smiled as he followed. Quidditch was so much fun.

A/N: There. Dealt with. Sorta. All happiness, sunshine, rainbows, and the ever-present love of Quidditch. The next chapter is Alan, Pranks, and Geoffrey, followed by a chapter of Umbridge! I know, you're all awaiting it with bated breath. I hope you like! Also, are any of you morbidly curious about Neville's attack as I have it in oneshot and may post it if there's interest. If not, there are a few other things I could put up in there. I am still open to suggestions for them.

Thank you for reading, please review? Loves,

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty

Monday morning, Harry was surprised to get a strange owl in the morning post – his mother usually wrote on Saturdays – but he accepted it anyways and reflexively checked the scroll for strange spells. There were none unexpected – a few weatherproofing, another to keep it shut until it was removed from the owl – and without noticing Ron and Hermione's curious looks at the spell work, he opened the cylindrical package and blinked as he opened to the European Magical Monthly. He smiled as he took in the front image, and spread the magazine flat so his friends could see as well. Ron made a choking noise, and Hermione gasped happily.

"Oh, wow. He really did give an interview, didn't he?"

The cover was a portrait of Alan giving the photographer a wry smile, and above it on the right side was the caption, "A first hand account of the real discord in Britain" Hermione made a querulous sound.

"What is this magazine? I've never found it."

"It's nowhere near common; I've rarely seen it." Harry admitted. "It's a travel magazine, circulated through most of Europe, and a few further places excluding America. It talks about breeding seasons for magical creatures, the most recent business developments, and the political climates." Harry explained. "Every magazine has some obscure translating spell on it that lets everyone read it without having to worry about marketing different editions. The scope of what it covers and that spell are part of the reason it's an expensive magazine, but also respected and in demand by some circles." Harry then frowned. "Alan never told me he was giving an interview. When would he have managed this?"

Ron frowned. "He was off with Luna on the last Hogsmeade weekend. I think Umbridge would have jumped him if he'd left any other time. Doesn't Luna's father –"

Ginny ran over before he finished and smiled as she saw the Magical Monthly. "Oh good, you got one too. I got the Quibbler's article from Luna. Alan did the interview on the last Hogsmeade weekend, and

the Quibbler went out yesterday; Magical Monthly released a special bimonthly issue for its subscribers as an ‘important update’, at least that’s what Blaise said. His mother got her issue last Tuesday, but since he says EMM’s a very limited run the Quibbler will probably get more reaction around here. Alan said you got yours now just to be special; he asked the lady to do it.” Ginny bounced in place. “I’m so excited.” Her giddy expression suddenly turned vindictive. “What do you think Umbridge will do?”

Harry shrugged, and then frowned. “Why isn’t Alan inundated with owls?”

“Don’t know.” Ginny shrugged. “If he’s told Blaise, it hasn’t come through to me.”

Ron frowned at the reminder of his sister’s boyfriend, but didn’t say anything even as his gaze slid to Harry again. Hermione had stolen the magazine and was reading the article, politely tilting it to let Neville read as well. Harry turned to Ginny as he waited for the return of his magazine and nodded at the two readers.

“Is the article in each magazine the same?”

“No,” Ginny answered, “Although essentially it is. Because Magical Monthly has such a broad audience, there’s a lot more information in that article, although most of it is background on the war. At the end is speculation about the causes and when the upheaval should abate. It’s a travel magazine, so the approach is different.”

Harry smiled wryly, “Are you quoting Blaise?” Ginny blushed, and Harry’s smile became a grin. “Whatever,” Harry waved her away. “I’ll check it out when I get it back. How long do you think it’ll take Umbridge to notice?”

“With the Quibbler out? Blaise is betting by the afternoon.”

“What are the odds?” Harry inquired idly. No one answered, and finally Ron asked,

“Mate, what are you staring at the air for?”

Harry flushed and came back to himself. "Sorry. I forgot I wasn't hanging with Blaise so he wouldn't give me the betting pool. I should go ask."

Harry stood and left, leaving behind his incredulous friends, Neville still sitting by – pointedly not touching – Hermione.

As it turned out, the betting was pointless. Harry's trip over to Alan and Blaise prompted Umbridge to scuttle over to find out what the large interhouse group was up to. Luna most proudly presented the Quibbler article to Umbridge and didn't blink an eyelash as it was insulted, stomped upon, and banned as soon as the signs could be put up. As soon as she left the group, however, Alan beamed at Luna and kissed her cheek. Harry, amused and mollified by the relaxed and triumphant air of Alan's group leaned against the table and finally stated,

"Okay, apparently that was planned."

Alan smiled, and Lucille indulgently explained. "Blaise rather scathingly pointed out last week that the moment Umbridge caught wind of the interview she'd have a conniption and prevent it from entering the school. Well, what's the quickest way to get a bunch of teenagers to do something?"

"Ahh," Harry laughed. "Contraband is hotter than dragon fire. Make it forbidden, and everyone will want to read it. Why put it in the Magical Monthly, though? I doubt Umbridge even knows about that."

Alan smiled warmly. "I gave the interview to a friend of Lucille's, Janathon Leader." Harry saw Dillan perk up, and Alan nodded to him. "She normally works for the Magical Monthly and felt it would be a beneficial article for the magazine to run, so I wasn't about to deny her."

Harry smiled ironically, "And now much of Europe knows that Cornelius Fudge is a backwards idiot." Alan just continued to smile like a sated cat, and Harry finally shook his head. "Whatever works, you Slytherin. I'll see you in Potions?"

"Of course." Alan nodded benevolently. "I hope you get the article back before Umbridge catches on and bans the EMM too. I think you'll like that article in particular."

Harry gave Alan a raised eyebrow, but waved and walked out to History. Neville handed him the magazine, and Harry read the article as Binns droned on and on, finally using a spell Alan had showed him, muffliato, on himself to keep Binns soporific voice out of his head; it was putting him to sleep even while he tried to ignore it. When he came out of History, Harry was surprised at the breadth of the article; Ms. Leader must have done a ton of research to write such an in-depth article. Most of it wasn't focused on Alan's experience; indeed, that had been mostly relegated to fact rather than sensation, even when it was the main point. Harry had never seen the war in such a clear light, although a large amount of it was out of his depth. He'd send the magazine home during lunch: neither his parents nor the Longbottoms received either the Quibbler nor the Magical Monthly and he really wanted them to read it.

However, several facts surprised Harry and he made a point of arriving early to Potions to ask Alan about it. Sitting happily in the spot next to Alan, Harry unpacked his stuff and shot him a look.

"I read the article; I'm sending it home during lunch, but where did you get all the names from?" Harry asked quietly. "You didn't have those at the end of last year."

Alan blinked at Harry and nodded slowly. The reminder clearly discomfited him but Harry wasn't going to tiptoe around the point; Alan would be even more upset if he were treated delicately.

"It came out recently." Alan evaded. "It's not that it's unmentionable, just that it's not important." A faint sibilance surrounded both times he said 'not', noticeable only because of his vicinity, and Harry nodded slowly. That was going to be a thing to figure out: how did Theodore get all the names?

Alan glanced back over at him and tilted his head. Harry looked over and Alan blinked a few times. After a minute, Harry remembered the

practice Alan had had him do with Legilimency and subtly, hesitantly he attempted it.

With Alan facilitating his entry, it was relatively easy which was good because he was just above useless at the skill. Immediately, he was directed to a memory, and Harry saw Alan's dorm, Blaise laying on his bed, Alan sitting at the head. Theodore had a book open on his lap, his quill lax in his hand and his soft voice filling the confines their silenced and locked room.

" –he's getting feeble in his old age, and stupid. He's completely sure of my 'loyalty' so he doesn't restrict me; he couldn't if he tried. He's so senile he never noticed that I could use Legilimency, and he's never attempted to learn Occlumency. He fears the Dark Lord's disapproval. Anyways, I only attempted it because I was curious; I didn't really need it. When I got home from school, he bragged about the Dark Lord's return, and about how proud he would be when I was of age and he would present me to him." Theodore's lip curled in disgust, and he spat, "I will not be a servant."

Harry felt Alan's amusement; apparently a lot of his friends were developing such a sentiment. It was part of what drew Blaise to him in the first year, part of what attracted Lucille and Salvador to a younger student.

"He told me most everything, but no names. When I practiced Legilimency, it was ... well; I'm not really good. But my father's so old, and so obsessed. The meeting was ripe in his mind, and he knew everyone who was there and everyone who should be there." His gaze rose, and Alan knew the accusation like the back of his hand ...

Alan pushed gently, and Harry retreated, coming out of it disoriented and fighting a yawn. Practicing left him so very worn. His mind felt wrung out, and it was fortunate he was paired with Alan because he wouldn't be able to concentrate well for a few hours. Severus brushed in, and Harry immediately straightened and gave it his best face. Curiosity had a price, and he didn't need Severus adding to it.

As Luna had known, banning the Quibbler ensured all of the students fought to get a hold of the article. Harry sent the EMM out barely in time; Umbridge found out that it also held a copy of the interview and went into a fury, banning it as well, the notices going up next to all of the ones involving the Quibbler.

That evening, when Umbridge came into the supper hall, she immediately disappeared or so it seemed. The laughter started at the Slytherin table and moved across the Hall in a wave of whispers. The Staff table, already mostly full, didn't seem too hurried about getting the news, and just waited as it filtered through the students. It was barely a few minutes before it came through from Hannah at the Hufflepuff table; she got up and ran over to hug Ron, much to his embarrassment. Hannah quickly remembered herself and stopped, blushing darkly even as she spoke, a smile on her face.

"Oh, you won't believe this! Umbridge got turned into a toad! A literal toad! Fred, George, was that you?"

The twins blinked and mournfully shook their heads. "No, we didn't have anything for today. Human to animal transfiguration ... whoever did that was good. That's a trigger-spell combination that's more than a little difficult. If we find out, we definitely want to talk to whoever did that."

Harry blinked as the murmur changed, and watched a tall, black-haired Ravenclaw push out from the table and walk into the aisle, picking something up and carrying it up to the staff table, presenting the huge, ugly toad to Dumbledore; it spilled over the boy's hands, larger than a dinner plate. He then spoke, and Harry was surprised he could hear; he hadn't thought the boy had used any spells and maybe he hadn't, but even at the far end of the Gryffindor table his words were clear.

"Here Headmaster. I felt we should spare her the long hop and just bring her up here. You might wish to change her back elsewhere, though, ma'am." He nodded to McGonagall. "The pile of clothes suggests she won't have retained her decency."

His tone was apologetic. Harry stared for a moment longer; he was sure he knew who the boy was, and finally it clicked: Jonas Hodges. Remembering Alan's warnings, though, Harry stayed silent, biting his lip to check his laughter. He didn't know what precipitated the move, but man. Whatever she did, the revenge of a seventh year Ravenclaw was interesting. Even more so was that none of the staff table made any move to scold him despite the plain tone that said he was at fault. Poor Umbridge, to be so unliked... Except he really didn't care.

Unfortunately, Neville and Hermione were no longer off balance and just because Neville had taken to mostly remaining silent didn't mean he held too strongly to it.

"What just occurred to you, Harry?" Neville asked. "You've got a look that's rather blatant. Hasn't Alan cured you of that yet?"

Harry turned to frown at Neville. "Alan isn't my keeper." He protested indignantly.

"But you did just think of something." Hermione shot. "What was it? Do you know who that boy who got Madam Umbridge was?"

Harry frowned again, this time in worry. Finally, he sighed. "I really can't say," He offered, and left it at that. Neville and Hermione both gave him long searching looks and gave in. Ron, however, didn't.

"What do you mean by that?"

Neville sighed lightly, but didn't speak up again. Hermione frowned at Neville and corrected Ron. "Harry either knows and doesn't want to tell us; would be acted against if he did tell us, or doesn't know and feels like being an ass. I suspect it's all a Slytherin trait he's cultivating."

Harry gave Hermione and Ron a crooked smile, and then turned back to finishing his meal. They left him alone after that, concerned or annoyed looks held in check for the moment.

The next day during break, Fred and George were making a small commotion selling some sort of Headless Hats when the tall dark Ravenclaw of yesterday came up through there and picked up a hat to examine it. Fred immediately turned and snatched it back with a smile, clearly talking quickly. Jonas grinned coldly back and made a return offer. The twins abruptly put the harking on hold and entered a tight circle of conversation with the fellow seventh year. Across the courtyard, Harry leaned back against a pillar, smiling most satisfactorily. Hermione jumped him again.

“Harry, who is that?”

“I’m sure the twins will have an answer for you when you beard them at lunch.” Harry evaded. Neville finally sighed.

“Harry, why are you being so cagey?”

“Neville, you remember when you got cursed senseless last month?”

Neville blinked for a moment, and then suddenly made a small ‘oh’ of surprise. He laughed tightly, and gently waved off Hermione’s inquiries. “Hermione, just leave him alone. He really shouldn’t risk telling you. It’s probably just ridiculously cautious, but in this case better safe than sorry.”

Hermione huffed angrily. “What do you both know that you can’t tell me? This is getting really frustrating, Harry, and you, Neville, aren’t helping. Some of us aren’t so stupid that you need to keep us in the dark! I don’t think it’s fair for you to keep brushing me off, and Ron as well.” Ron, behind her, squeaked at his sudden inclusion. “Just because you two are long-term friends doesn’t give you the right to marginalize me and Ron for only being friends since school began. But apparently five years means nothing to you! I don’t know why I keep bothering to talk to you if I get brushed off every time something happens you don’t think I’ll follow.”

Harry bit back an undignified ‘eep’. Hermione had a point, and he was an idiot. “I’m sorry, Hermione!” Harry blurted. “Really, I … wow. Um, wow.” Sheepishly he ran his hand over his face, and then jumped when the bell rang. Worriedly, he waved her beside him as he turned

to make for Transfiguration, sheepishly looking up at her. "Hermione, I'm really sorry. I never noticed I was doing that, and I shouldn't. I'm just ... it's not just Neville that's keeping me from including you."

"Then what is it?" Hermione asked, her ire spent and replaced with an implacable curiosity.

"You know how I rather abruptly made friends with Alan this year."

"You said you'd been friends since second year." Hermione pointed out. "When you cleaned up everything with Neville. What does – are you worried I won't like the Slytherins?"

"Partially, and next that you won't get along with them. And it's only partly the fact that you're muggleborn."

"Okay, why might I not get along with them?" Hermione asked. She was not going to be diverted. "Harry, I want to be your friend but I've been pushed aside my whole life and I'm tired of it. Either tell me, or just leave."

Harry winced again. "If you retain the opinion that Slytherins are conniving bastards, well, you're going to be completely accurate but it's ... it's as bad as calling you a bushy-haired bookworm. It's not wrong, no. But is it really something to be pointed out?"

Hermione took him at his word and thought about it for several minutes before nodding slowly. "Alright. I guess you're right." She looked over at him, and the look was one step up from outright crying for the blackmail. "But please. I don't want to be cut off."

Harry sighed. Great. Hermione, Neville, and Blaise in the same room. He was so screwed. Salvador would kill him. Lucille would have a new best friend. "Alright." He agreed, and then grinned. "Neville, how badly do you think Salvador will kill me for introducing Lucille to Hermione?"

Neville snorted delicately. "I think he'll have to wait until Alan and Blaise finish with you. The two of them are going to be Hell on the bookwork. We'll never get any talking done."

Harry laughed quietly and Hermione pouted before he ushered her into her seat with Ron and took the spot by Neville in class, waiting for McGonagall to come in. Harry leaned forward to reassure her, "You can come with me during lunch to find them. They'll probably be in the library if they're not still at the Slytherin table. Ron, if you want to come you can but you can't insult any of them unless you want to be bodily removed from the area with your toes tied in a knot."

Ron swallowed, and after a moment just quietly shook his head. "I'll run into them ... later. I've got homework to work on. Will ..." He looked worriedly between Neville, Hermione and Harry, and Hermione smiled brightly at him.

"I'll gladly go over your homework after supper, Ron, to make sure everything's good. It's no trouble."

Ron subsided with a few quick nods, and then he settled into his seat as McGonagall came in and class started.

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The hype from the articles lasted for the entire week, and by the end of it, although it had died down, the general attitude of the school had changed. Umbridge was being eyed with suspicion, and it seemed to be particularly coming from the Ravenclaws. There was a tension in the air, and no longer was it against Alan. Alan's interview had turned a lot of opinions; most of the houses had changed their support, save for Slytherin. Harry strongly suspected the choice to ban the magazines entirely – with such a harsh penalty – had played strongly in turning the school against Umbridge. However, she didn't seem to notice, as, conversely, the action had solidified the promise for those who would believe the Dark Lord's return, or those who blindly followed the ministry. The entire school was on edge.

The week after prompted a wave of subversive pranks. Small things, like tied shoelaces, lost buttons, dry inkwells and trip jinxes aimed from both sides. Alan seemed to be able to walk in a pool of calm, but Blaise got himself another detention when he picked a fight with Marietta Edgecomb over a broken quill. Harry and his were mostly left

alone; any Gryffindor who wasn't supporting Dumbledore was dead silent about it. Harry didn't really agree with their quiet acquiescence, but he supposed it was for the better at the moment.

However, such minor things were abruptly shattered when the Monday after, dinner was interrupted by a loud and piercing shriek. Sitting at the Gryffindor table, it was a struggle to get through to see what was happening, but several people parted ways easily for his glare and face, and as the shrieking continued, Ron finally squeaked,

"Professor Trelawney! It looks like she's getting sacked!"

Harry gave up on getting a view of it, and looked up the stairs. Professor Umbridge was standing at the top looking immensely self-satisfied.

"You c-can't!" A woman sobbed. Harry assumed it was Professor Trelawney; he'd never really met the woman himself, not taking Divination. "You c-can't sack me! I've b-been here sixteen years! H-Hogwarts is m-my h-home!"

"It was your home," Some twisted pleasure crossed Umbridge's face as she watched the brokenly sobbing Trelawney in the space between all the students, "until an hour ago, when the Minister of Magic counter-signed the order for your dismissal. Now kindly remove yourself from this hall. You are embarrassing us."

Irritably, Harry elbowed one of the students in his way, and the black-haired girl frowned but moved herself and her friend aside, affording Harry a rough look at the scene from between the last row of students. Trelawney was sitting on one of her trunks, the other overturned beside her, an empty bottle of sherry hanging loosely in her hand. She was shuddering in paroxysms of grief; to his right, Harry could hear several girls sniffing and sobbing as well. It was very annoying, really, but to see Umbridge smiling so happily at Trelawney's tears made Harry clench his fists impotently. He didn't like the woman; he thought she was a fraud. But she was still a teacher, and a much better one than he could imagine Umbridge being. Umbridge had no right to be throwing her out!

Abruptly, McGonagall strode across the floor, and moved to comfort Trelawney, handing her a handkerchief and reassuring words, words Harry wasn't sure she could make good on. Umbridge bristled in offence, and then the doors to the Entrance Hall opened. The melodrama was too much; when Dumbledore stood framed most impressively against the darkened, misty grounds, Harry just snorted. Ron and Hermione hushed him irritably as they listened.

All in all, it didn't much affect Harry; he didn't take Divination, and while he found that Dumbledore's decision to hire Firenze in Trelawney's place was foolish and petty, he had no say in the matter. It was, however, interesting to hear from Firenze that Hagrid's attempt was not working, whatever it was. It fired his curiosity about it once more, but got him nowhere. Hagrid didn't want to hear it, and would say nothing about it. When Harry lost his temper and yelled at him, however, Hagrid proved to have a bit of giant in him after all when he firmly picked Harry up and placed him outside the door with a grumbled admonition to leave him alone. Ashamed, Harry quietly apologized through the wood and left without waiting for the acknowledgement. The tension was just killing him. He wished Umbridge were gone.

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The frustration had one benefit: Alan had noted it, and immediately told Harry to bring his friends down to the Chamber the first weekend in April. Their escape was much easier since the twins' products still creating havoc from their birthday celebration, and Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ron and the twins snuck down early Saturday morning. They had not expected to arrive and find Alan and his plus Melanie, Nanna, and Ginny already there, much less Geoffrey lounging in a conjured overstuffed armchair. As they came in, Geoffrey cracked an eye open and Alan smiled warmly. There were more than twenty people present; Harry had never had a meeting so full down here. What was Alan up to?

"Hey!" Alan called. "You brought everyone?" The question in his voice gave it a deeper meaning than the surface.

Harry just smiled. "Certainly. Hermione gave me the what for weeks ago. You remember."

Alan smiled; he did remember, and, as expected, Hermione had hit it off with Lucille right off the bat. Alan, Blaise, Theodore and Salvador had all given him wounded looks. Neville had just laughed, but Hermione had been welcomed in easily. Ron still hadn't come to join them in the library, but he wasn't arguing against them doing so and knew he had a standing invitation. However, when Alan had invited him down this weekend, he'd said bring everyone, so Harry had talked him into it. When he mentioned that Ginny would probably be down there as well, it had cinched it for Ron. Harry had been surprised when the twins admitted to receiving an invitation from Jonas Hodges, who had taken a keen interest in their pranks since he'd turned Umbridge into a toad. Part of the birthday celebration initiative had been because Jonas had dared them to cause massive havoc without getting caught. Naturally, the twins hadn't been able to turn the dare down. Harry suspected there was something more to it, but the twins weren't talking.

At any rate, between all the circumstances an extended group had arrived in the Chamber, and Alan quickly bounced to his feet, giving the tired-looking Geoffrey a disparaging look, and then turned to the rather full table to begin to introduce everyone.

"Alright, everyone I invited is here and everyone those people invited are here as well so since I think a few of you haven't crossed paths before, sit down and we'll have a rundown." He mock-glared. "Do it, because I said so."

Jonas sent a rude gesture at Alan, but obligingly sat next to Dillan at the far end. Harry took the empty seat at Alan's right, across from Blaise, Neville at his right, followed by the twins, Ron, and Hermione. Harry frowned; the table wasn't long enough for everybody, but apparently it was being made do with, as Lucille sat on Salvador's lap, and Ginny on Blaise's. Ron and the twins both made strangled startled noises, but a glare from Ginny kept the protestations unvoiced. Alan merely laughed and waved Luna onto his seat, which he'd vacated in favour of standing. Clearing his throat to get attention, Stephanie and the Head Girl turned around in their seats, their friends

standing nearby, one of them taking the initiative to sit on the black girl's lap. Harry blinked at it, and then turned at a delicate cough. Daphne was standing nearby, smiling.

"May I take your lap, Harry? There aren't anymore seats and I'd rather not stand."

The entire table rumbled with faint laughter, and Harry cursed as he blushed, but he sat back and smiled despite it. "Sure, have a seat."

Daphne gave him a brilliant smile and gently sat on his lap. Ron shook his head as he chortled.

"What, no more Susan?"

Harry coloured again, and shrugged awkwardly. "Hey, I'm not hitched to her yet. I'm allowed to flirt and the like and Susan's not here." He sniffed pointedly. "My lap was cold."

"Bet it ain't cold now." Blaise shot.

Harry grinned at him. "Shut up. You've got a lap warmer yourself."

"Enough." Alan scolded, laughter in his own voice. "Enough people here have lap warmers, we don't have to discuss it. I was trying to do introductions for those who aren't all familiar with each other, unless no one is interested?"

A few people scoffed, but Fred, George and Hermione made affirmative noises, and Jonas just sighed. "Get on with it already, Alan."

Alan sent a rude gesture back at Jonas, and then pointed to Blaise and Ginny in the first seat on his left. "Blaise Zabini, son of the lovely black widow, and the youngest Weasley, first female in generations. Behind them are the beanpole Theodore Nott and the lovely Tracey Davis. Next to Blaise is Melanie Longbottom, Neville's illustrious younger sister, and then Nanna Potter, Harry's notorious little sister."

The introductions got various responses; Melanie and Nanna blushed, Ginny and Blaise made faces and Theodore made another exchange of vulgar sign language as Tracey just rolled her eyes.

“Salvador is the other black boy with a lap warmer, who’s gotten an invite to take the name of Baker since the Hopkins didn’t like him telling them where to shove it, and his lap warmer is Lucille Pupp, the bird brained Amazon.” Alan had to duck a hex immediately, but he just laughed and continued, as she sent no more. “Next is Stephanie Rothschild, the black-haired beautiful seventh year, and her friends, the Head Girl, Julianna Ellsmare in the red hair, Raina Kozumplik as the small bundle of power,” Alan ducked another spell, “Victoria Growman, tall, brunette, and shapely, and last but not least, Morgen Thatass, the black lady of the hour, and daughter of the Minister of Magic from … some years ago. Who’s currently got Victoria warming her lap.”

Alan paused to bow to the seventh years, to much giggling, and a blush from Victoria, and then nodded to the end of the table where Dillan and Jonas sat. “The far end is the place for Jonas Hodges, the other seventh year on my end, and Dillan Baker, the fourth year associate of the infamous Hodges.” Alan made a face at them, and then laughed. “They’re your British hand in the pool of not-quite-legal.”

Jonas raised an eyebrow at Alan, and Alan blatantly returned the gesture, his posture daring him to say otherwise. Jonas settled back into his chair with a Cheshire grin, hands folded lazily over his belly, eyes half-lidded. He was purposefully looking dangerous, but Alan just smiled brightly and turned to nod at Hermione, brushing off the display.

“And to move into the Gryffindors, Hermione Granger, the bird brained lion girl who is most welcomed by our Lucille, and then next to her a set of three Weasleys, Ron, the Gryffindor Keeper,” Ron straightened at the acknowledgement, looking almost surprised, “and then the Gryffindor Beaters, more seventh years, Fred and George, who have also been running the wonderful pranks against Madam Umbridge.” Alan’s voice was mocking the title. “Beside them is Neville Longbottom, of much revised repute nowadays and perfectly capable

of rivalling Blaise, and then Harry Potter with the lap warmer Daphne Greengrass, a beauty intent upon snagging her current chair cushion.”

Harry snorted. “What, no snappy quip for me?”

“You need as much of a quip as I do, Harry, so shut it. I haven’t finished.” Alan stuck his tongue out and turned to pull Luna up, pulling her in front of himself and wrapping his arms around her shoulders. At 192 cm, he was plenty tall enough to do so, and Luna happily leaned back into his chest. “Luna Lovegood, prettiest girl in Hogwarts, and smart enough in her own odd as Hell way.”

Luna looked up at him with a dreamy smile. “You’re always so flattering, Alan.”

The group laughed again, and when Alan leaned down and kissed her, Blaise and Theodore both started loudly counting seconds. Alan completely ignored them, turning Luna enough to kiss comfortably, and finally Harry coughed to no effect. He was about to consider a second option, when Geoffrey spoke up.

“Alan, I think whatever little carnivorous bug she threatened you with is satiated now. You can get on with the little lesson you dragged me out of bed for.”

Alan pulled away with a peck on her nose that got a groan from the watchers, and then turned to negligently wave at Geoffrey. “And in case someone doesn’t know,” he said sarcastically, “That’s Geoffrey Alfaerus, my uncle. From America. Suffering from Saturday morning syndrome.” Alan turned and sniffed disdainfully. “What, I gave you coffee.”

“You still woke me too damn early on a Saturday. Are we practicing or not?”

“Yes. We are.” Alan turned back to the group and waved at the far end of the Chamber. “Go ahead and get up – warm laps or not – and we’ll start practicing at the far end, near that ridiculous statue.” Fortunately for the sensibilities of his Slytherin associates, all of them

expected Alan to disparage the Chamber of their founder and thus there was only a faint whine from one of Stephanie's friends as they scooted their chairs back and made a quick walk back to the depths, Alan chivvyng Geoffrey along behind them.

Geoffrey, despite his complaints, woke up fairly quickly and began to lecture as soon as they were all milling about in the area. "We're going to be going over some very advanced spells – some of you will struggle to cast them, most likely." He nodded at Nanna and Melanie. "But most of you won't. They will all be seventh year spells or higher. Since we're going into a time where, no matter how badly Umbridge wants to claim otherwise, you will be fighting; they will be based in defending yourself, as counterpoint to classic lessons. How many here can cast Porrybaxter's Wall of Wings?" Stephanie, Raina, Jonas, and Neville raised their hands. "How many have attempted it?" Harry, Alan, and all the seventh years added their hands. "How many of you can cast a Patronus?" Harry, Alan, Jonas, Neville, and Victoria raised their hands. "Attempted?" Lucille raised her hand alone. "Now, I trust we're all not going to be naming names or anything?"

"If anyone here talks and gets us in trouble, they'll wish they couldn't talk anymore." Jonas growled.

Geoffrey gave him a firm glare, which just made Jonas smile crookedly, and the rest of the students simply shook their heads rapidly, a few of whom looked at Jonas nervously.

"Okay, Jonas? No more threats. I think we all understand just how bloodthirsty the Hodges are." Jonas' smirk widened, and Geoffrey just rolled his eyes, muttered something along the lines of 'neutral, my ass' and continued. "Since we are all friends, I want an honest estimation: How many here know how to cast and control Fiendfyre? Honestly. We won't be learning it, but we'll be learning about it and how to control it, and stop it. Hands up. I know from Alan most of you."

Neville gave Harry a dirty look as he added his hand to Jonas, Harry and Alan's. Blaise hesitated, but upon seeing Neville's inclusion raised his own. Most of them glanced at Harry and Alan, and finally there were nine hands raised: Harry, Alan, Neville, Jonas, Dillan,

Salvador, Theodore, Blaise, and Morgen. Geoffrey cocked his head to the side. “Does anyone know it and not know how to control it?” Everyone without raised hands shook their heads. Ginny, Nanna, and Melanie were staring at Harry and Neville in surprise. Neville wouldn’t look at his sister as he put his hand down.

Geoffrey nodded slowly. “Well, that was a few unexpected names.” Neville glared at him, but Geoffrey just grinned unrepentantly. “We’ll be going over how to cancel out Fiendfyre from an opposing point of view only, and then we’ll review the improvisation we went over before Christmas.”

Jonas abruptly raised his hand with an impatient look. Geoffrey eyed him a moment before nodding.

“Will you cover any offensive spells, Professor Alfaerus?” He put a mocking twist on the name; Harry would have to ask Alan just what on earth was between the two of them that they were so hostile. Geoffrey simply ignored the sarcasm and shrugged.

“I don’t think most of you need any such training, but if you would like to suggest something, be my guest. Keep in mind we have a few young women here,” He nodded to Nanna and Melanie, “and we are going over some of this in class, with that project to perfect a spell.”

Jonas snorted, and then stepped to the side, out of the group. He raised his arm, wand in hand, and then lashed it down. A long tongue of flame arced out, slapping against the floor and splattering, going out save for a glowing tip on his wand. Jonas lashed it again, curling the flame in a spin, a whip of fire. Alan made a small noise of recognition, and Jonas let the whip go, his wand darkening once more.

Geoffrey looked over the students and asked, “Does anyone else know that spell?”

Alan’s hand went up immediately, followed by Dillan, Theodore, and Raina. Geoffrey nodded.

"Alright, we'll go over that if we have time as well. First, though, I think most of you should have an introduction into casting the Patronus. Casting a Patronus usually takes quite a bit of work. Does anyone have a concise explanation of the spell?"

Lucille and Victoria both shot their hands into the air. Geoffrey looked them over and then gave Neville a wry smile. "Mr. Longbottom?" He asked, patiently. He'd made a habit of forcibly calling on Neville during class when he knew Neville had an answer and was just not placing himself forward anymore.

Neville blinked as the only sign of surprise, and sighed. "The Patronus is a conjuration of positive feelings and good memories to drive off a dementor and its effects."

Geoffrey nodded. "Well said. The incantation is *Expecto Patronum*; the effect is usually a white or silvery mist. A particularly strong casting creates a corporeal form, which is related to the memory you chose and your focus, not your actual strength." Geoffrey gave a bit of a foolish smile. "My wife, while a fairly weak witch, can easily conjure a Patronus. Took her less time to learn it than I did. Some of you, however, will not be able to. That's fine. Take time to practice and good luck. It's very different conjuring a Patronus in a controlled environment, and conjuring one when faced with a dementor. Can I have a demonstration?"

"What," Alan jibed, "don't want to show off your Border collie?"

Geoffrey flipped Alan off, and then gently waved his wand to the side. A brilliant mist shot out, and quickly formed a shaggy, thin-limbed dog that darted over and around the students, coming out and then barking silently at them before looking back between the kids and Geoffrey and then fading from view.

Harry smiled warmly, and then intoned, "*Expecto Patronum!*" His memory was the one he'd used for years, which had surprised him when it worked: it was his mother hugging him after his first attempt on a broom, and several other interactions. As he thought, he added on this Christmas, when Lily had walked into the library and found Harry and Alan debating over a book on the table. Harry had

awkwardly waved at her, and then felt deliriously happy when she just smiled warmly and waved back, walking on down the stairs. Out of his wand came a heavyset tiger, landing nimbly, and crouching, looking around at the gathered students, and then turning to Harry, walking back and rubbing its insubstantial self against his legs for a few minutes.

His tiger didn't go away immediately, and Harry looked up to find Alan had already conjured his fox. A bright light came from over his head, and Harry looked up and gaped as a huge turtle swam over him through the air. A faint pressure came against his legs and Harry looked down to see a smaller puma approaching his tiger with a curious tilt to its head. Looking up, Harry found Jonas watching him; the puma turned tail and darted back over to circle his legs, so Harry presumed the Patronus was his. Geoffrey whistled abruptly, and Harry's tiger disappeared; the room darkened as the rest followed suit, and Geoffrey quickly smiled.

"Alright, ready to try it out?"

A/N: Next chapter, you lovely people! All nice and polite and kind and sweet and calm and collected. Keep your shorts on and don't worry, the roller coaster will go on through the twists and turns soon enough. I'm sure you all know when that will happen ... Grins evilly Thank you for reading; please review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-one

Usually it was Alan who had information about the outside world first, but apparently this time around was to be different. After the very successful weekend lesson with Geoffrey, with promise of another in the next few weeks, Harry was enjoying classes with a small joy of defying Umbridge. However, it was during Herbology Wednesday when suddenly the small key necklace he wore went bitingly cold. He yelped; it was directly against his skin. Neville and Hermione both looked up at him as he awkwardly fished it out. No one else noticed, as they were working with Fanged Geraniums; a yelp was not out of place. Professor Sprout hustled over impatiently as Harry stared at the faint blue glow on his key with dread. When she saw it, she gasped.

“Potter, I didn’t know you had a watchkey.”

It was uncommon for parents to give their children a watchkey, the necklace that had panicked his parents in his first and second years by alerting them when his life was in danger. More unusual, and more expensive on an already exorbitant price, was a key where the parents could contact the child in the other direction, to tell the child the parents needed help. However, a number of purebloods had them as heirlooms - they were reparable for a large fee - and thus their signs were fairly well known.

“Professor Sprout, I need to see Professor Dumbledore about this.”

Professor Sprout pointed to the door. “Go. You’re excused.”

Harry nodded to her, glanced to see Neville nodding – his bag would be taken care of - and then turned and ran out the door, his necklace loose against his robes. He didn’t know why his parents had activated it; surely there were more people they could contact easily. But they knew the moment they did so, his unmentioned personal opinion aside, Harry would run immediately to Professor Dumbledore. Maybe that was all they needed ... Harry hoped that was it. He didn’t want to think his parents were in danger.

The unfortunate thing with Herbology was that it was outside, and the Headmaster's office was inside and Harry had never learned where it was. Sure, he may have gone there a time or two, but he'd never paid attention to how to get there himself. He supposed it was fair to look, or he could pull out the map ... Harry cursed. Neville had the revised map in his bag, and now it was too late to get it. If all else failed, he'd seek out McGonagall, but he hoped it wouldn't.

Running up the stairs, Harry eyed the empty halls carefully, wondering what was going on and where he might go in the meantime. He raced past a corridor with a huddled group of taller students, and then paused, looking back down. Two of them had red hair.

"Fred! George!" Harry called.

The twins turned, and their companions – the black Lee Jordan, and the lean Jonas Hodges – straightened and hailed him cheerily before motioning for silence. Harry ran over to them and shook his head at their joyous looks. Jonas' eyes went immediately to the faintly blue necklace resting against Harry's robes.

Harry didn't wait for greetings. "Guys, I need to know where the Headmaster's office is. I have to contact him now, don't you have your Map on you?" He was beyond secrecy.

Fred and George frowned, but answered his urgency by handing the blank, worn parchment over. Harry tapped it without speaking and activated it, waiting impatiently for the lines to coalesce, asking, "You don't know where it is offhand?"

"No." Fred answered warily.

Harry shot a look at Jonas and got a wary smile. "Surprisingly, neither do I know. I don't usually end up there."

"Huh." Harry offered, flipping through the pages fervently. "Something you don't know."

"Amazing, isn't it?" Jonas returned dryly.

Harry smiled tightly back at him and scanned the map for Albus Dumbledore. Unfortunately, this one did not home in on a name at the sound of it, so he had to look and struggle until the twins pointed out the office with Dumbledore pacing slowly inside. Harry breathed a short sigh of relief, and then tried to find himself. Jonas easily answered before he spoke.

"You want two floors up, hang a right, bypass three corridors and go down the fourth, and then you want to look for the deep alcove with the gargoyle. How to get past the gargoyle I wouldn't know." Jonas quirked his lips, his eyes greedily trailing over the details on the map. "That map is really useful. I never knew that gargoyle was his."

Harry nodded without thinking too hard, handed the map back and then paused. "You know where Umbridge is?"

"Staring irritably at Sinistra's class." Lee answered. "You're in the clear for the time being."

Harry smiled shakily and took off running again. Dumbledore's office was still a ways away.

Fortunately, the stairwell was nearby and he'd been repeating Jonas' directions in his mind obsessively. He was up, down the hall and looking for the alcove before he worried about the gargoyle problem. When he found it, Harry eyed it nervously and sighed. Well, he was here. He just had to find out what that meant for him. He coughed lightly and addressed the Gargoyle quietly.

"Hello, I uh ... I need to see the Headmaster. It's urgent; I got a message from my parents. Do you have any way of talking to the Headmaster, or something? C'mon, I need up!"

Thankfully, the Gargoyle ground aside a few moments after he spoke, revealing a staircase moving slowly upwards. Harry stepped quickly onto it, too shaken by worry to stop fidgeting. The gargoyle ground back into place, and he slowly moved upwards to meet a door with a brass griffon knocker. Harry knocked timidly, and then answered the

faint welcome by cautiously opening the door. Dumbledore's face was surprised a moment before he smiled warmly and greeted him, his eyes scanning down and then locking on the blue-glowing key.

"Harry, I am surprised to see you. What brings you here?"

"Sir, my watchkey went cold about ten minutes ago while I was in Herbology. Do you know where my parents are?"

The Headmaster's eyes sharpened, and he turned to go behind his desk sitting and addressing a spindly silver device. Finally, however, he sighed, and looked back over at Harry.

"I do not know at this moment, however I know I am needed. The warning is timely. Which parent keeps the other watchkey?"

"My mother." Harry answered simply. "Why go through me? If they needed you, why me? You have other communications."

"Harry, I cannot tell you —"

"Bollocks!" Harry spat.

"Harry, calm yourself —"

"My parents are in trouble, and you're refusing to answer me! I'm old enough to know if you're going to use me as some messenger boy. Now either tell me, or get to work on helping them."

Dumbledore's face turned into a disapproving frown, but he waved at the chair before him and Harry threw himself into the seat sullenly as Dumbledore moved to organize several things before looking at the small silver device again. He sighed heavily, and then looked over his glasses at Harry.

"Harry, I do not have the leisure to explain everything at this moment, but I would be much more able to divulge the information to you at a later time. I can send a message as soon as your parents' condition is assured —"

"Oh, and just happen to forget to send it? Or gloss over everything. I don't trust you." Harry could've bitten his tongue as he said the words, but his frustrated anger wasn't listening to him. He wasn't even that angry; it just burst out.

Dumbledore's twinkles died, and he gave Harry a long searching look. Harry wasn't oblivious when he sent a subtle probe into his mind and petulantly, Harry blocked him, knocking the attempt aside as firmly as he could. Dumbledore's eyebrows rose.

"Very well." He allowed. "I believe you are free come the weekend. I will see you ... Saturday afternoon, perhaps, to share some tea as well? And you will receive a message as soon as your parents' condition is ascertained. You don't need to worry yourself; I will do the best I can, but I cannot keep you informed while I give aid. Please."

Harry nodded a little too quickly. He knew Dumbledore was needed elsewhere; he didn't even know where the frustration had come from. "Alright sir, I'm sorry about ..."

"It is completely understandable. Please, return to class. Keep your watchkey close."

Harry's hand closed over the glowing, cold metal. It wouldn't warm up until his parents deactivated their side. If it broke ... "Of course, sir. T-thank you."

Harry hurried down the stairs with his mind in a tumult, biting his lip carefully as he stepped past the gargoyle and watched it go back into place. He'd be back here Saturday afternoon, then. Hopefully he'd be able to calm down.

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Of course, Neville and the others asked after what happened immediately, but Harry had no answer for them. No answer came at all that day, and Harry went to his room clutching his key. The glow had disappeared shortly after supper, the metal warming, but no note had come from Dumbledore. He'd stayed up until midnight, and even

when he gave in and attempted sleep well after everyone else, he got nowhere with it. Finally, resigning himself to a sleepless night, Harry pulled out his bag and returned to the common room, working on refining his assignments and then revising against the subjects he wasn't doing so well in. Arithmancy was the OWL he least looked forward to, only because Alan was tutoring him in Potions and History was a lost cause.

It was probably about five in the morning when McGonagall came through the Portrait hole and saw him working there. Surprise crossed her face. Harry looked up blankly at her, and then felt his own features tighten as hers settled from her surprise into lines Harry had never noticed before.

"Your parents are both fine, Harry." McGonagall quietly assured him.

Harry nodded slowly, but he could tell something was wrong. She didn't elaborate, and finally Harry just tilted his head to the side, silently encouraging her to continue.

McGonagall took a deep breath before she managed to collect herself enough to answer. "The Minister has removed Dumbledore from being Headmaster and attempted to arrest him. Dumbledore escaped, but Dolores Umbridge is now Headmistress of the school."

Harry's quill slipped from nerveless fingers, and he managed to thinly ask, "How? What happened?"

McGonagall rubbed her face tiredly. "Regulus Black was captured by Aurors earlier today. I believe that would be what prompted your father to get you to tell Dumbledore to contact him. When Regulus named Dumbledore as someone to vouch for him not being a Death Eater, the Ministry ran wild with the name and tried to call him in on harbouring a Death Eater and a dangerous fugitive. Of course Dumbledore didn't allow them to arrest him, but he cannot return until the Ministry reverses its position. He –he said to send his regrets on the postponement of the conversation he promised you."

She sent him a curious look, but Harry wasn't in the mood to explain. He was too horrified at the thought of losing Dumbledore, and at

Umbridge having free reign in the school. Finally, he bit his lip, and then sighed.

“Alright, thanks. I should … get to bed.” Harry offered.

McGonagall nodded. “I’d offer you the morning off, but Madam Umbridge would not tolerate it, and probably find it suspicious. Please, go sleep. I’ll see you later, Mr. Potter.”

“Goodnight.” Harry called. He watched her leave with a tight expression, and then gathered his books and papers. He could probably get an hour or two of sleep if he could relax. Lying down would at least help. It wasn’t like he could do much else.

||||

It was as McGonagall had said. Neville woke a very tired Harry in the morning with a frown, and then he became suspicious when Harry asked if he had his communications mirror for his parents. Neville had nodded without speaking, and Harry had sighed before telling him there’d probably be an announcement downstairs. Neville had straightened, and, after another searching look, told Harry to be smart about getting ready and to meet him downstairs. Harry had taken his time anyways, and when he met the others, Neville was waiting with an accusatory look in his eyes.

“Pray tell how you knew this was happening, Harry.” Neville shot.

Harry gave him a tired smile. “You think I stayed up all night for nothing?”

Hermione frowned, but Neville’s gaze wasn’t giving an inch. A small motion from him stopped Hermione’s question. Harry idly wondered how long it’d take them to get back together, but he snapped back to attention when Neville asked again,

“You didn’t know this would happen. You were worried about your parents. You got news, then?”

Harry nodded. "McGonagall told me. Oh dear ..." Harry went pale as he remembered just what had preceded Dumbledore's dismissal. He'd missed it the night before. "Alan will be fit to be tied. Shit."

Neville gave him a curious look and then eyed the ceiling. "At least I'm not alone when he makes these little jumps. Harry, what - happened?"

Harry smiled weakly. "You decided to not be quite as reticent anymore?" He offered.

Neville sneered.

Harry just shook his head in return, and rolled his eyes distinctly; it was meant to indicate the people around them. Neville frowned, but straightened and picked up his bag as he caught on. "Fine. Food. Ron, lead the way, will you?"

Ron looked between them all and succinctly summarized his feelings, "You're all mad."

Hermione huffed. "Let's just go. The sooner we leave, the sooner we'll be somewhere where we can tie these two up and interrogate them. And maybe Alan and Blaise too."

"What would they have to add?" Ron asked, confused.

"You'd be surprised at what those two might know." Harry shot. "They know more stuff they shouldn't than they should, I swear."

Ron looked only more confused and Hermione just sighed, sending a short glare Harry's direction. Harry simply shrugged blithely in return, impatient to get into the Great Hall and see what was up. He was surprised when Alan and Blaise were sitting in their seats far calmer than Harry expected. Harry looked up at McGonagall, but the woman was sitting next to Madam Umbridge and looking like she was trying not to gag. Harry brazenly walked over to Alan and his friends, leaning over his shoulder.

"What do you think of this fine morning's missive, dear friend?" Harry asked as pleasantly as he could manage.

Alan sniffed delicately. "It's the biggest piece of horse pucky I've seen in a long time, and I can't wait for it to be sorted out."

Harry's heart sank. Alan didn't know. Oh, he so didn't want to be the messenger. "You heard anything from your dad about what happened?"

Alan tilted his head; leaning on his shoulder, Harry felt the action more than he saw it. "No, I haven't. Do you know something of what happened? I can't imagine how they sacked him."

Harry bit his lip a moment too long, because Alan looked up at him with his eyes narrowed. Across the table, Lucille and Salvador's conversation became stilted, and Blaise shifted on his other side. The attention of the group shifted palpably, but Harry immediately put on an act; they knew he knew, but he didn't want it out of their group. As Slytherins, they would notice immediately when he lied so obviously.

"I don't know either." However, the whole school must know he left Herbology, so he couldn't leave it at that. "I did get a message from my dad, though, through my watchkey, so Dumbledore left to take care of that. I haven't heard anything about it past that my parents are alright."

The Slytherins nodded carefully, but the tension didn't leave them. Alan caught Harry's eye carefully, and Harry tapped his free necklace, the serpent from his father. Alan's face opened deceptively. He looked more relaxed, but Harry recognized the acquisition of a full mask. He was hiding himself. He knew Harry couldn't tell him here, and with the level of secrecy he'd requested, going to the Chamber of Secrets, it was something big. And for all Harry knew, Alan could very well know it was a secret Harry did not want to tell him. He was about to try for more conversation, bumping lightly against Blaise to request the seat – Neville, Ron and Hermione had continued to Gryffindor – when Draco drawled behind him,

"Potter, I think you're a little lost. This is the Slytherin table. The place for thick-skulled buffoons is on the far side of the Hall."

As one, Alan's group turned their attention to Draco like a pack of wolves. He stiffened visibly, but kept his bravado by puffing out his chest. Light glinted off a small badge pinned prominently on his robes, and he smiled thinly.

"I think I'll have to take points for that, Potter. Ten points for such a horrendous mistake."

"There are no rules about mixing with other houses, Draco." Blaise growled. "What's the new shiny? A gift from home?"

Draco grinned with much more confidence now. "No, it's a sign of my superiority. I'm the one trusted by the new Headmistress; one of her eyes and ears in the school. A member of the Inquisitorial Squad."

"Good Merlin," Daphne swooned, "did you come up with that name too? It's as terrible as the little ditty you tried out at the match with Gryffindor earlier this year."

Draco paled. "Better watch your mouth, Greengrass." Draco snarled. "I don't think the new Headmistress will be so lenient on your attitudes. I suppose it's more the entire group here that's the problem; Potter isn't so out of place hanging out with you scum."

"You hear that Alan?" Harry jibed. "I'm as Slytherin as you are."

The entire group burst out laughing, and Draco paled again. Behind him, Montague stepped up and eyed the ruckus. "Enough." He grumbled. When the attention moved to him, he flinched minutely but turned his glare on Harry. "No Gryffindors allowed. Go cuddle your little badger if your own table is out of sorts. Slytherins don't disgrace themselves. So get, before you're in detention."

Harry frowned, but when Montague reached for him he ducked and danced out of reach, his small frown still in place. "Fine." Harry faked a yawn. "I suppose the fumes of the rest of you were getting to me anyways. Really, Alan, have some courtesy next time and clean the

air around your group. I know you've had to get used to it, but my nose is still delicate. We don't have such undesirables in Gryffindor." Harry turned a wry eye on Montague and then strolled as quickly as he could away while still looking leisurely. Montague and Draco were still confused, but Alan's group was stifling laughter. Harry felt Umbridge's eyes watching him with malice as he rejoined Neville and the others. Neville sent him a questioning look, but Harry just shook his head slowly. Neville frowned and subsided; he wasn't invited.

"Will you explain yourself?" Neville asked curiously.

"Eventually. I just need to tell Alan first."

"What happened over there?" Hermione asked.

Ron swallowed and nodded. "It looked like Malfoy found some balls." He was unfazed by Hermione's fierce glare for the wording.

"It seems Umbridge has made her first change." Harry sighed. "She elected an 'Inquisitorial Squad'. Malfoy and Montague are in it, and apparently several others. None of Alan's friends are members. I don't even know if it extends past Slytherin, but they're above prefects." Harry idly took a bite, and then mused, "There goes our chance for the House Cup. We'll just have to win at Quidditch."

Ron gave a wicked grin, and Ginny, having overheard just smiled. "I'll pass the news on, if you like." She offered, nodding her head at the main Chasers.

Harry smiled. "Do that. And tell Fred and George to look for the little 'i' badges when they target students. But warn them the punishment for being caught will probably be severe."

Ginny nodded and her, Nanna and Melanie moved down the table to talk to the rest of the Quidditch team. Hermione sighed and Ron sullenly dug into his food. Neville's silence had returned, as it always did, and he turned idly towards the sombre Staff Table. Harry didn't need to reminder. Alan would have a fit when he heard ...

'Fit' wasn't quite accurate. Alan paled, and then immediately left the Chamber, Harry tailing him all the way to Severus' rooms. His father wasn't there, and Alan ignored the floo in favour of the mirror on the mantelpiece, immediately calling to Geoffrey. When that got no one, he went through a whole list of names from ones Harry recognized to ones Harry hadn't even heard before. Finally, Andrew picked up and grinned.

"Alan, you haven't contacted me in ages. What's up?"

"You heard anything from your dad, Geoffrey, or Green?"

"Green's in an experiment; dad's in some hot spring. I don't think anyone's heard from Geoffrey. Hey, glass, Alan, glass!" Andrew quickly called, apparently reading Alan well from just seeing his face. He was plainly itching to smash something; his frustration was palpable. "Whoa, what went wrong Alan? What's happening?"

Alan ground his teeth, and then thrust the mirror to Harry while he stormed into the lab, slamming the door behind him and magically locking it. Harry watched him go for a moment, and then jumped when Andrew called, "Earth to Potter! Houston, hey!"

"Sorry! Alan just stormed out."

Andrew waved him off, the image in the mirror showing that he was surprisingly under-dressed, and holding the mirror far enough back to show his shoulders and his feet waving up and behind his head; presumably, he was lying down with the mirror out in front. Harry tried to fight his blush, but Andrew just snickered.

"Relax, already. I'm in shorts and too worried and too far away to consider ravishing you senseless."

Harry scowled. "I was not worried."

"Then you've got to work on the attempts at dying your hair. The red should be in the hair, not your face."

Harry wondered how Alan put up with Andrew's foibles; there were a Hell of a lot of them.

"What gives, though?" The concern in his voice startled Harry. He'd forgotten Andrew had reason to be worried. "Alan doesn't go off like that for nothing."

Harry hesitated, but reminded himself Andrew knew Regulus better than he did. "Regulus got arrested. When he tried to get them to let him contact Dumbledore about his innocence, they took it and called Dumbledore on housing a dangerous fugitive."

Andrew firmly proved that he hung out with the Alfaerus as he vehemently swore. "They didn't!" He continued, staring wide-eyed at him. "How stupid are they? Geoffrey'll have their guts for fucking garters! Are they mad? Seriously!"

Harry huffed. "Well, they did it and now Umbitch is Headmistress. I don't know what's happening now. Geoffrey and Severus were here long enough for classes and then skedaddled before supper. I don't even think they were at lunch."

Andrew leaned on his fist and sighed. "Ginger is probably going to do most of the work at talking to the officials; she's had legal training. They haven't contacted Lucille yet, so they probably don't need any threats at the present moment. Something will have to break; Geoffrey can't let that lie."

"Why?" Harry asked curiously. "Obviously he's a friend, but I've been hanging around Slytherins too long and you said 'can't' not 'won't'."

Andrew grinned. "We have been around too many Slytherins. You're making sense to me. And the answer is Slytherin as well. Letting the British government convict a man the Alfaerus had labelled safe and changed would be a slight to us, and the Alfaerus have several reasons to do a bit of grandstanding, especially in Britain. Not only do they not like being called wrong, they also need to show the power to protect those they've claimed."

"What's the deal with Britain?"

Andrew scratched the back of his neck, and then sighed. "You met Jonas Hodges?" Harry nodded. "That's why. Ask your dad who the Hodges are. You said he's an Auror, so he'll probably sigh heavily or whine." Harry winced. Alan perked immediately. "What?"

"Andrew ... damn." Harry did not want to explain this to him.

"Oh, no you don't get away with evading this." Andrew's voice warmed with teasing. "I'm curious now. Don't ever make a vampire curious."

"Andrew ... I was told the Hodges are only ever Ravenclaws when they love books more than people. Otherwise, they're Slytherins. My dad hates Slytherins."

Andrew blinked a moment, and then sighed. "Man, I thought Alan was exaggerating when he told me that. Guess not. That's fucking sad." He gave Harry a coy look. "Can I bite him?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Alan and my dad both told me I'd be an instant Slytherin if I ever went to Hogwarts. So I want to needle him sooo badly. Please?"

Harry sighed, and then smiled. "Go right ahead. He's currently not talking to me since I openly made friends with Alan. Course, neither's Severus."

Andrew snorted. "He would be closemouthed about that, wouldn't he?"

Harry sighed and nodded, wincing when he felt a wave of something arc across the room from the lab. Oh boy. Andrew was observant, but waited until Harry's face cleared before he simply raised his eyebrow. Harry shrugged weakly.

"Something just washed over me from the lab."

He didn't expect Alan to swear again. "Harry, look if there's a way to contact Severus or Geoffrey. Alan's got it bad; he's gonna make a mess of himself and anyone else. If you can't get them on this mirror, go get either your Healer, or the strongest adult you trust. He might have hurt himself with that, and if he didn't he might hurt himself later because he's not going to stop."

Harry's eyes widened, and he nodded quickly before bidding him a quick goodbye. Andrew cut the line before Harry could, and Harry quickly breathed both Severus and Geoffrey's names. On his second try for them, Severus picked up and then scowled dangerously. Harry didn't let him start the dangerous deprecations that waited on his tongue.

"Severus, Alan's really upset right now. I heard from McGonagall about Regulus and told him. He's locked himself in your lab, and a wave of power just shook up the room. Andrew told me to try for you and Geoffrey again, or fetch someone in case he hurt himself. Please, Professor Snape." Harry hoped he didn't lose points for picking up Alan's habits of calling him Severus. He needed him to take care of Alan first ...

With how vile his expression was, Harry couldn't tell what was the main cause, but his voice was clearly worried. "I can't leave, and neither can Geoffrey at the moment. Did he ward the lab?" Harry nodded curtly. "Then fetch McGonagall first and tell her he might be injured." His scowl somehow deepened; Harry had thought it couldn't happen. "Do it discretely, if you're anything like Alan says. Umbridge does not need to know. I have to return to business. Tell Alan we are taking care of it, and I should be back to my rooms this evening, but he is to be in his dorm and not give Umbridge reason to penalize him. That is directly from his father. Use my clear words, and he might actually listen."

Severus cut the connection abruptly and Harry cast a worried gaze at the lab before leaving promptly. It was both worry for Alan, and a desire to impress Severus: he could do exactly as he was told. As he ran, he worked the words Severus had said over and over in his mind until he was quite confident in his ability to relay them to Alan later on. McGonagall, he knew, would be in her office, and he wished he had

Neville's wind to be able to run all the way there. Unfortunately, he ran into Umbridge almost literally and barely skipped out of her way, backing up and impulsively bowing before he moved to take off again.

"No running in the halls, Potter. What has you in such a hurry?"

"Sorry Madam Umbridge." Harry panted. "Neville wanted me to check if he'd left his notebook in the Great Hall, but it's nearing curfew and I need to be back in Gryffindor tower. I'll stop running, Ma'am."

Umbridge smiled sickeningly at him, but she nodded and waved him off, "Well then, best hurry. You've ten minutes child."

Harry nodded hurriedly again and moved up to McGonagall's office, feeling a wave of relief when he remembered that for once he did have his invisibility cloak on him. He'd put it in his bag when he realized that Umbridge was now in control. Good. He'd be able to get back to his dorms afterwards, and Neville would cover for him until he got back.

He came to McGonagall's door and knocked hard. The Deputy Headmistress wrenched the door open, and then frowned lightly at Harry.

"Potter, curfew is in five minutes and you're a ways from Gryffindor tower. What are you doing, risking Madam Umbridge's anger?"

"I told Alan the news about Regulus. He tried to contact Geoffrey or Severus, but neither was answering so he locked himself in his father's labs and warded the door. I waited, but after about fifteen minutes a shockwave went through the room. Professor, he might have hurt himself. I finally got Severus, and neither he nor Geoffrey can come back so he told me to get you."

McGonagall's lips thinned, but she nodded curtly. "Alright. You can return to your dorm—"

"McGonagall, I need to deliver a message to him from Severus and I want to know he's alright. If I can step in, I have my father's invisibility cloak."

McGonagall gave him a careful frown, but stepped back. Harry entered the office feeling a little awkward, and quickly dug his cloak out and pulled it on. When he felt he was covered, he asked, "Is it all covered?"

McGonagall nodded. "Alright. Keep pace with me, then. I'm not sure I know how to get into Severus' labs, either."

"Well, if you're there I might be able to and I'll just put the blame of any damage on you." Harry offered quietly. "I'll be right behind you."

McGonagall nodded again, then swept out of her office, holding the door a moment for Harry to slip out behind her, and then she went quickly down the stairs. Harry had to struggle a bit to keep up with the very tall teacher, but after several minutes he found the pace to hold to follow along behind her comfortably. As expected, there weren't very many people up and about, so he had no difficulties beyond making sure the cloak wasn't revealing his legs with how quickly he was walking. Still, it was a long walk and he was quite worried when he got back down, up until another shock rumbled the stones. McGonagall paled.

"Is that what you felt earlier?"

"Yes." Harry answered softly. "Do you know the password?" McGonagall shook her head, and Harry sighed. He couldn't remember it either, but he did know what Alan had told him. He stepped up to the stones to look for it, as McGonagall huffed.

"Did you bring me down without knowing how to get back in yourself?"

"Pretty much, but ... here." Harry stepped back and stared at the discrete snake carved in between two stones; it was a bypass for Parselmouths. Alan had assured him they were everywhere in the dungeons. Apparently Slytherin hadn't trusted any of the lower levels outside of his control. "Open for the snake-tongued." Harry commanded. The words were a soft hiss, and McGonagall made a small startled gasp as the door opened. Harry slipped inside quickly,

followed by his teacher and he doffed the cloak easily, moving over to the lab door. Would the wards prevent him if he found a similar mark there?

"The lab is there, I presume? I can almost feel the layers of wards; I don't know some of them, Mr. Potter. How am I to help?"

"I don't know." Harry groused. "You were just the person everyone else recommended, and I wanted a teacher. I'm not supposed to be taking care of everything."

McGonagall didn't seem to know what to say to that. He wasn't sure if he wanted to call it luck someone suddenly knocked on the door or not, but Harry quickly snatched up his cloak, and McGonagall went to open the door and act like she was supposed to be there. She jumped when she looked outside.

"Filius! What brings you down here?"

"Probably the same thing that brought you. What are those shocks, Minerva? They're coming from down here, I can tell."

Harry bit his lip a moment, but when McGonagall looked around the room in confusion, Harry hoped he was right and dropped the hood of the cloak. Flitwick squeaked, and stared between them.

"Professor Flitwick, it's Alan that's causing the shocks, and we're trying to get to him to calm him down. He's locked himself in the labs, and Severus can't return to deal with it. Would you be willing to help?" Harry knew Flitwick wasn't in the Order; he didn't know about Regulus, but Flitwick also knew something about wards and Harry didn't want to play with Alan's wards blindly if he didn't have to.

"Minnie! Oh my. A student, you say?"

"Yes." McGonagall bit out. "Please, come in. Umbridge would have a field day."

"Yes, well, I suspect she didn't even feel anything coming from down here at all." Flitwick squeaked as he trotted inside. "My, those are

some wards. Some are American patents; the Yanks have the most fascinating spellwork."

He went immediately to the door to the lab and started to stare and poke at the area. Harry and McGonagall remained farther back, Harry cautiously stepping out from under his cloak, folding it over the couch. He wondered if Alan had given a mirror to one of his schoolmates, because Harry needed one of them to get him into his dorm. Trying it himself would rather accentuate the fact that he was out of bounds. The Slytherins weren't that hung up on keeping within the common room; only the dungeons. Perhaps Blaise would be on patrol.

Flitwick was still staring at the wall, so Harry pounced on his bag and pulled out the new Marauder's Map, knowing McGonagall was watching him intently. He activated it silently, and then felt McGonagall look over his shoulder at the writing.

"Mr. Potter ... what is this?"

"My dad made it, with his friends." Harry offered, hoping to direct her to bug James, and not him. Harry traced the dungeons and there! Blaise was patrolling, but with him was Pansy Parkinson. He bit his lip ... would they be able to oust Pansy to get Alan back to his room? Maybe if he were cloaked ... but would he be able to get back to Gryffindor tower uncaught without his invisibility cloak?

"My my." McGonagall suddenly chuckled. Harry blinked, and looked up at her. She hesitated, and then pointed to an upper level Harry had left exposed. Madam Umbridge was at the corridor where the Headmaster's office was, and with the footprint markers, you could tell she was pacing angrily, and then stomping her foot. Harry snorted. McGonagall echoed him.

"Watch yourselves!" Flitwick suddenly called. Harry and McGonagall looked up instantly, and with a flash of sparks, Flitwick brought down what must have been a few layers of wards. He squeaked, and then tapped the wall again. "Oh my. We still need to get the door open, and I don't think Hogwarts would like us to fiddle with it."

Harry suddenly remembered, and stood and walked to the wall quickly, glancing down at the map. When he got to the door, a tiny speech bubble appeared and his footprints said, “Amber spoke”

“Weird.” Harry offered quietly, but he hesitated, and accidentally hissed the password. How in the ... Parseltongue. He was focused on another speaker, maybe? Either way, the door pulled open, and Harry, suspecting Alan’s mood, quickly erected a shield he was immediately grateful for as Alan’s spell blasted into him. Unbalanced, he fell onto his ass immediately, but yelled, “Alan, get your fucking act together; I got a hold of your father, dammit, and we’re out of curfew!”

Alan stormed to the doorframe, but hesitated and slowed upon seeing Flitwick and McGonagall behind Harry. He snarled. “Fine.” The word was a virulent hiss; Harry only barely realized he’d been speaking parseltongue before as well. “What – happened?”

Harry delicately stood and dusted himself off. He wasn’t sure if he should try and get out of the parseltongue or not, but decided Severus could explain later. Flitwick wasn’t in the Order. “He didn’t say. He promised he’d be back to his rooms tonight, but he wants you in your dorm.” Alan opened his mouth angrily, and Harry quickly repeated Severus’ words, “They are taking care of it, and he should be back to his rooms this evening, but you are to be in your dorm and not give Umbridge reason to penalize you. That is directly from your father.” Harry’s mouth quirked, “Pretty much word for word, too.”

Alan’s mouth twitched. “Did you memorize that?” The words had become English.

Harry smiled. “He said I should, although he seemed to think I couldn’t. He also said you’d be more likely to listen if I did.”

Alan simply shook his head, and then swooned. Harry quickly stood, and stepped over to him, catching him before he fell. “Dammit Alan, what the Hell were you doing?”

Alan groaned and held his head. He didn’t answer, but Flitwick gave a strained laugh. With a bit of a sinking feeling, Harry turned and eyed the black wall at the far end of the room. He strongly suspected

it hadn't been black before Alan went in there. Sighing, Harry hefted him again and dragged him into the room proper, letting him sag into the couch.

"Blaise is on patrol, but he's got a tagalong, Pansy Parkinson." Harry offered. "You could use my cloak to follow them and get back to your room without notice. Surely Blaise can take care of Pansy long enough, right?"

Alan nodded without opening his eyes. Harry was surprised when McGonagall came back into the room – he hadn't known she'd left – and handed Alan a glass of water.

"Drink. You've caused enough trouble tonight."

Alan looked up at the brusque order and just smiled, accepting the water with a careful nod. A cautious look was exchanged between the teachers, when McGonagall sniffed. "Potter, if you're going to be heading back to Gryffindor tower with your invisibility cloak, you might want to come with me. I can say I was checking, so no one will question the open door."

"Actually, McGonagall, he's lending me the invisibility cloak because I've got the Inquisitorial squad to avoid. He'll just be running up to the tower naked."

Harry cuffed Alan on the shoulder. "I'm dressed, fool. Go stalk Blaise and Pansy. See how many times you can make that girl see ghosts."

"Yessir. I'll go make sure my dad stares in awe at you for getting me to listen. You go follow your teacher like a good little boy." Alan stood shakily and snatched up the silvery fabric, drawing it about him without raising the hood. He fit the cloak quite well, actually. It was too large for Harry.

Harry stuck out his tongue and then eyed the map. "Hey, Blaise is going to be coming around sometime soon. I presume neither you nor Flitwick will be executed for being out, but I can get back on my own. No one in Gryffindor will turn me in, so it'll almost be easier."

McGonagall's lips thinned, but she reluctantly nodded. "Alright. I could give you a note, if you wanted. Just in case it will grant some leeway from Umbridge, although I wouldn't rely on it." She looked like she'd swallowed something nasty.

Harry eyed her oddly, but nodded and waited until Blaise and Pansy had passed the door. Once they were gone, the teachers and students left, Harry eyeing the map for the nearest shortcut, and waving as he jogged off, a short note in his pocket, leaving his Head of House behind. As he left, the last thing he heard Flitwick chirp to McGonagall,

"Students like those make you proud to be a teacher. Clever, resourceful, powerful ..."

"Yes." McGonagall agreed. "They also make me glad I am not their mother."

A/N: Here we go, what every one of you knew was inevitable. And then I prove once again I am a brat and send you back onto the lovely little rollercoaster of mine. Get ready for a nice little false drop ... you know what to expect. Love you all, and thank you for anyone who reviewed!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-two

The next day was tense. Umbridge called Harry down to her office and forced tea on him, but Harry faked drinking it, answering her inquiries tiredly, cautiously, and unhelpfully. Most of them he couldn't answer anyways, but when she finished and coldly informed him she'd find out everything, he widened his eyes and then hurried out to fetch his mirror to his parents. Neither picked up. The rest of the week was no better, even with Easter holidays starting. Nobody was releasing any information, even inside the school.

Finally, three days after Umbridge was raised Headmistress Harry put down his cutlery and turned his gaze firmly onto Ginny.

“Where were you last night?”

“Detention.” Ginny answered lightly. She didn’t look at him. She reminded him of Lucille in all her contrary glory, and his mouth tightened.

“Oh? And what was the cause of this detention?”

“Insubordination.”

“And what was the punishment?”

“Nothing much.” Ginny shrugged delicately. “Just helping out Filch.”

“Nothing much.” Harry repeated. He sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair. “You know, that would work better if Blaise, Alan, and Salvador weren’t saying the exact same thing in the exact same way. What the Hell is going on?” Harry growled, and slammed his fist onto the table. “Nobody is saying anything, much less my parents and I’m tired of all the secrets!”

Ginny turned a frosty glare on him and quickly gathered her things up, hands shaking. “Fine. I’ll just leave then, so you don’t have to look at me while I keep secrets!”

Harry watched her go with a feeling of helplessness. He wasn't the only one; Neville and Hermione looked almost identical as they turned as she went, and Ron had forgotten his food. Harry looked them over, and Neville just shrugged. Hermione sighed. "We don't know anything either, Harry. I hadn't even noticed the Slytherins were being silent about something."

"It takes practice to know what they look like when they're tense." Harry brushed her off. "I can't get anything out of them either. What the Hell could be going on?"

"Threats." Neville offered quietly. "Filch has been rather pleased with himself lately."

"Of course he is." Harry shrugged. "Umbridge has been playing to him for so long ... He said something about her getting an order of expulsion for Peeves – good luck with that working – and then about some sort of authorization. Umbridge likes us as quiet as he does, of course he's happy."

Neville started to play with his dinner plate with a thoughtful expression, but Harry was too incensed to care. He looked back at Hermione and then sighed once more, gathered his books and standing. "I'm going to the library to study. Are you guys done?"

Ron pushed away his plate and grabbed his bag. Hermione and Neville quickly followed suit, and they tramped up to a common table to put their stuff together and begin revising.

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Things heated up rather quickly once more. With Alan and his becoming relatively quiet, the Inquisitorial Squad got more brazen. The first week of Easter holidays, Neville sent four of them to the hospital wing for mocking him and calling him a whore. He got detention, three days in a row. Interestingly enough, it didn't change him much – he'd been quiet for months now, and this wasn't any different, but Harry had had it with secrets. The evening after his detentions finished, Harry pinned him in the dorm and Neville simply looked at him, and then crawled beyond his hangings. Harry followed:

Neville's secrecy spells were better than his. Neville put a finger against his lips, and then raised his sleeves. His wrists were red and raw – not bleeding, but clearly painful, and then he turned and doffed his robe, raising his shirt. Red stripes crossed his back.

Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. This was ten times worse than the blood quill, and it was only detention with Filch. He was whipping students? It was unbelievable, but Harry couldn't think ... there was little else it could be from what Neville had just shown him, and it would most definitely explain why Alan had become cautious but why weren't they talking ... threats. Oh, so Slytherin ...

"Threats?" Harry offered quietly. Neville shrugged and then nodded firmly. "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred." Harry moaned.

"It's another three days for letting someone else know." Neville offered quietly. "Personally, I think it'd be less painful than leaving you in the dark again to hound everyone."

Harry laughed bitterly, but a look at Neville's face told him that Neville was telling only a sliver of the truth. They were brothers. Neville couldn't bring himself to keep a secret from him, and Harry promised to not lie to Neville again. He wouldn't keep a secret either.

Harry smiled thinly. "Well, you didn't tell me anything. I remembered Filch was ever so excited about getting permission to whip students and figured it out myself from your stiff backs."

Neville smiled sickly. "Ah, but she wouldn't care. It's all just another reason to punish a student, particularly one of those who are defying her such as me, or you, or Alan. The names Weasley, Longbottom, and Potter are rather forfeit in her eyes."

Harry ground his teeth, and then stuck his head out of the curtains, flashing his wand to open his trunk and summon out his communications mirror. It slipped into the hangings, and Harry eyed it before turning to Neville.

"She didn't let you take it to Pomfrey, did she?"

“Same thing as telling.”

“But she didn’t say anything about healing it yourself?”

Neville tilted his head carefully. “She’d probably disapprove of it, but she never said anything, no. I don’t know any healing spells quite good enough to do for this, and I – well, really. I don’t want it to happen again.”

Harry frowned, but it made sense. “Fair enough. However, it still makes me think we should learn some healing spells. Maybe we could talk Madam Pomfrey into coming down to the Chamber with the rest of our group sometime this week. Even if Geoffrey can’t teach us, enough students know the spells we could teach ourselves. You almost had your Patronus back.”

Neville blinked, and then nodded. He’d learned the spell years ago, but after being attacked by Bellatrix, he just couldn’t make the spell work. He’d gotten the white mist, but it was incorporeal, but before they’d had to leave, a shape had slowly begun to coalesce.

“How are you going to communicate the idea to Alan and Blaise?” Neville asked quietly. “Interhouse relations are being discouraged by Slytherin.”

Harry grinned. “But they aren’t discouraging Ravenclaws from going over there other than Luna.”

Neville shook his head. “Harry,” He whined, but couldn’t hide his amusement, “That’s because they’re all scared shitless of Jonas.”

“Good enough for my purposes.”

“You’re willing to owe him a favour?” Neville gaped. “You sure you wanna know what sort of nonsense he’ll ask for?”

“It’s worth it.” Harry insisted. “And we just need to get another set of mirrors over here, maybe two. If mum can get me two, you and Blaise can be connected, and me and Alan.”

"How are you going to get your mother to send you those? Everything coming in is being checked."

"They're just mirrors."

"And getting four of them isn't suspicious?"

"So we disguise them as one mirror, then"

"You have to set the names first. The mirrors turn cloudy when talked at with no activation."

Harry tapped his chin, and sighed, falling onto his back. "Disguising them as one mirror is effective, but we can't have one of them on the front. Someone who can get a mirror would have to be a girl ... a possibly odd mirror should go to Luna, because she can get Blaise and Alan their mirrors, and then you and me ours. Mother knows I'm friends with Alan, and Luna is his girlfriend ... they also know the Lovegoods, so she can easily send Luna a gift ... even an odd one ... but how ..."

"And how are you going to talk your mother into smuggling you those?" Neville asked. "What reason?"

Harry sat up and looked at him oddly. "The truth, of course. I know about this ... punishment when I shouldn't anyways, and I'm not going to sit down and let her do this sort of thing to the school. If they expel me, mum can just send me to Salem."

Neville's lips tightened, but he didn't argue. Harry pulled up the mirror and quickly spoke, "Lily, mum." The glass clouded, and then cleared, revealing a tired Lily who smiled brightly upon seeing Harry's face.

"Harry! What are you doing calling me? Miss me already?" She looked mildly haggard, but still as elegant as always.

"Hey mum." Harry offered. "Of course I miss you, especially with how ridiculous the school's gotten. Did you know she set up students as her own police force, and they're running rampant?"

Lily frowned. "I'm not surprised."

"Yeah, and they're keeping Slytherin isolated, so I have no chance to talk to Alan or Blaise. In the interest of that, can you send two sets of communication mirrors to me for that? But you can't send it directly to me." Harry quickly amended. "I was thinking, if you could disguise them with a real mirror, you could send them to Luna and get her to give them to Alan and Blaise and then me and Neville, because Ravenclaw isn't so restricted as the polar opposites of Gryffindor and Slytherin."

Lily tapped her chin and nodded slowly. "I could certainly manage something like that. Would you be able to pass the plan to Luna?"

"Easily. Ginny's good friends with her, and so's Nanna and Melanie. They can relay the idea quickly enough."

"And to get into Slytherin?"

"Luna knows a Ravenclaw who's still welcome there."

Lily watched his face and then smiled thinly. "You twitched. What aren't you telling me?"

Harry did not want his parents quizzing him about Jonas. However, there were other things he didn't want to mention he could give up ... He carefully looked at her, and then looked away, biting his lip.

"As your mother, Harry, please tell me."

"I ... kinda found out by accident when I shouldn't have ... you remember Filch, right?" Lily nodded sternly, her expression still iron-hard. "Well, Umbridge won him over to her side with a few promises, including the expulsion of Peeves. But ... you know what else he kept complaining about?"

Lily's expression darkened so quickly, Harry wondered why he wasn't hearing thunder. "She didn't. Harry, tell me she didn't."

Harry squirmed. "I haven't gotten detention yet and neither has Nanna, but I'm not holding out on myself ... but ... Alan, Blaise and his aren't talking about it, and neither's Ginny. I ... I actually only know because Neville told me."

"Alice hasn't been informed he got detention again."

"Well, you see ... she's telling them to keep silent or they get another detention for telling."

Lily looked surprisingly scary. Harry was glad she wasn't angry with him, even if it still made him twitch. "Have any of them seen Madam Pomfrey?"

"Umbridge told them not to tell her either. But I want the communications mirror so that I can arrange with Alan and Blaise to bring a group of us to the Chamber and learn some healing spells, even if we can't use them on each other yet without getting caught. I thought they'd be really useful to know." Harry grinned weakly. "I think Pomfrey will greatly support the idea."

Lily sighed heavily. "I'll do it. I have an idea of how to hide the mirrors so they won't be found. Tell Luna the idea, and I'll have it there in two days at the most, but on the condition you contact Pomfrey about teaching you all healing spells. And Harry?"

Harry quickly looked up at the tone, and blinked at the firm expression she wore.

"Harry, you will contact me if she ever draws your blood again. I don't care why; I don't care how. If you bleed, you will tell me. If Neville, or your sister, or Ginny or anyone ... I want to know immediately. She will not harm my son like that."

"Mum, what can you do?" Harry sighed. "She's the ministry."

"Maybe I can't do anything now," Lily growled, "but the moment I can that woman will pay for it." She sighed, and returned to smiling weakly. "I love you, Harry, alright? You'll get the mirrors. I don't think I can tell your dad about this right now. He'd overreact." Harry laughed

with her. ‘James would overreact’ was an understatement. More like the Marauders would storm the Ministry.

Harry let the mirror dull and smiled at Neville. Neville only smiled weakly back, and Harry frowned sternly at him. “She will not find out you told me, Neville. I promise.”

Neville simply shook his head and shooed him out. Harry could tell he didn’t believe him. When did Neville become so pessimistic? He looked like he was preparing himself for pain. Harry didn’t like that look, and he put away his mirror with a frown before darting downstairs. Ginny, Nanna, and Melanie were not in sight, but Hermione was working on her homework, and a few of the other girls were sitting around, laughing and talking quietly. Approaching Hermione brought a hiss from a furious Crookshanks, so Harry left a message with Romilda to tell Melanie he wanted to speak with her in the morning. Romilda squeaked and blushed before nodding too quickly. Harry sighed, and went back upstairs.

Great. The school was falling apart, and he still had to deal with schoolgirl crushes.

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It worked remarkably well to get the mirrors between them all. Luna outright walked over to the Gryffindor table and kissed Harry and Neville on the cheeks, thanking him for his mother’s gift of a glorious mirror. She slipped their mirrors into their laps as she did so, and then wandered back to the Ravenclaw table without a care. Nobody called her on it. Later that evening, Neville poked his head through Harry’s hangings and sat on his bed, bespelling his curtains once more to reinforce the secrecy spells. His mirror was showing a tired Blaise. Harry’s shivered and glowed, and Harry heard Alan calling his name. Harry smiled.

“Hey Alan, how are you?”

“Fine. How’d you get Jonas to play messenger boy?”

"I told him I'd owe him a small favour, and yes, I know how dangerous that is but I don't really care."

Alan's face twisted and he laughed quietly, but he clearly didn't like it. "Well, so long as you acknowledge it. What did you get us the mirrors for, anyways? It wouldn't just be to chat, especially if you went to the effort to get Blaise one as well."

"I was thinking, and I figured out what I presume your silence is about," Harry ignored it as Alan's face closed, "but if we asked, Madam Pomfrey would likely teach us healing spells."

"We can't heal the marks. I've been checked twice. The woman is a serious sadist; she was present for both of them, and I don't know if it was just because it was me, or if she's there for each of them. I know Salvador got extra marks for healing himself the first time."

Harry swallowed at the news, and nodded carefully. "Even if we can't heal these, we can at least learn the spells for a later time, at a later date. They're not bad spells to know." Harry smirked, "It'll make Madam Pomfrey feel better, too."

Alan sighed, but it was more just a sad noise. "It makes sense. It does, so I guess I'll get them all together. It is Easter Break; it should be fairly easy to get in if you and yours go through first. Bring the badgers, if you like, and you get to be the one to summon Pomfrey."

Harry nodded. "Of course. And I doubt I'll bring the badgers; Hannah is going spare. Pulling her from her hardcore studying would kill her."

Alan smiled fondly. "She's been getting tutored by Geoffrey for the past three weeks. Alright, Blaise go scoot elsewhere to talk with Neville."

Neville heard the admonition and said goodbye to Alan and Harry before returning to his own bed. Once they were gone, Alan looked at Harry and frowned. "Neville could get in big trouble for telling you."

"He didn't tell me." Harry answered blithely; answering with his tone the unasked question that Neville had indeed told him. "Filch himself

told me. He outright said Umbridge was giving him permission to torture students, and when everyone went silent I drew the natural conclusion."

Alan sighed. "If he even confirmed your suspicions he's in trouble."

"He's started to avoid me, in fact, same as Ginny." Harry answered blandly, but he frowned and sighed, rolling over and laying down his head. "Actually, he's still preparing himself for the pain. When did he lose himself so badly, Alan?"

"Harry, you know how badly he was hurt at the end of break." Alan quietly offered. "I ... I half think he was hurt worse than I was, in the graveyard. It was cut and dry; his wasn't. The confusion is probably half of what's killing him."

"What's to be confused about; it was rape." Harry whined. It was surprisingly easy to talk without watching his words or tone when he couldn't see Alan's face. When he knew he was far away.

"Harry, rape's never that simple. I guess you're just in a bad position, because you can't understand but you care so much."

"Bad position is the short of it." Harry groused. "And the Umbitch isn't helping."

"I know." Alan sighed. "Jonas is planning something, I'm sure of it, but he seems to be working through the twins right now."

"The twins aren't minding." Harry answered softly. "They're having a grand time planning the end of the break. They're being quiet right now in deference of the studying for the OWLs."

"How thoughtful." Alan softly offered. "I'll have to make them cookies."

Harry blinked. "You can cook?"

"Of course I can cook!" Alan shot. He was clearly offended, but when Harry looked, his lips were curled into a small smile. "It's the same thing as making Potions, you idiot, except much easier. And don't

ever quote that in front of my father, or he'll find some way to give you a zero for the day."

Harry snickered quietly. "I'd like to try some of your cookies. You can bring them when we meet. Saturday sound good?"

"Two days before we go back to class." Alan observed. "Sounds like it works. You get to talk to Pomfrey tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow or Friday." Harry nodded. "Probably tomorrow. Early on Saturday?"

"Don't you have Quidditch practice?"

"That's evening."

Alan laughed quietly. "Works great, then. Jonas doesn't have practice either."

"He plays Quidditch?"

"He moved to reserve this year to give his replacement practice; he's not as idiotic about it as some. I think he plans on playing the last game, though. He's a Chaser."

"Weird." Harry offered. He mustn't have noticed in previous years; he supposed Jonas hadn't been anyone of note outside Ravenclaw.
"Have you seen the pamphlets, for jobs?"

"Yeah. Not much interests me. I plan on moving back to America after all this is over, when I finally get a job. I'll probably be a teacher, researcher ... maybe Auror reserve. Uncle Freyr would appreciate that. Green would love to have a helper who can put up with his insanity. What do you plan?"

"I don't know." Harry sighed. "I've sometimes thought of being an auror, but ..."

"You'd be compared with your father."

Harry tilted the mirror and nodded where Alan could see him.

"You could try a career with Potions. You're decent. You could even be a mediwizard, or curse breaker."

"My arithmancy sucks."

"Hit up Hermione or Neville for help. You could do fine."

Harry laughed bitterly. "Whatever."

Alan grinned. "You could go for Law. Your name would serve you there; you could be a British/American liaison, or a vampire liaison."

"You keep telling me my head will explode if I try and learn about vampires."

"Given time, it'd stop swelling." Alan replied straight-faced.

Harry huffed. "Well, how about I just take every class I qualify for then?"

"That could be a lot of work." Alan commented, but he didn't sound derisive.

"It'd leave my options open, that way."

Alan smiled thinly. "Most definitely. You going to be able to handle several NEWT classes?"

Harry shrugged and yawned. "How many do you think you'll take?"

"Depends on my scores. Mostly what I happen to do well in, same as you. I'll take quite a few, though; else I'll get harangued for being lazy going back to Salem. Everyone's expecting me to be top notch for having gone to Hogwarts, which has its lovely reputation whether they agree, or not. I think they're going to make me take the tests back home too just to be contrary and compare the systems."

Harry snickered even as he sighed, "Poor thing."

Alan stuck out his tongue. "I've half a mind to drag you to take the test too, you know."

"Make Neville take it. He likes tests."

Alan shook his head. "Neville's just unnatural. Go to bed, Harry. You're dead tired. You've shown me your tonsils at least twice."

Harry yawned again; Alan whined, and Harry shook his head. "If you're so offended, leave. I do need to sleep."

"See you Saturday, then?"

"Yeah, Saturday. If I survive Madam Pomfrey."

"Good luck. I would like to learn healing spells."

"Yessir. Goodnight." And Harry abruptly cut the line. Alan would linger if he didn't, the twit, just to see how long Harry would tough it out. The problem with mirrors was that he couldn't cuff him for it.

||||

Talking to Pomfrey proved more difficult than Harry expected. She agreed immediately. She simply insisted on knowing why he suddenly asked. She was better at fishing for information than Harry was, and she made the connection a lot faster than he had. She puffed up in outrage, and then forced herself to relax before dismissing Harry curtly, telling him to drop by Saturday morning as he'd planned. Harry repeated that she had to keep quiet until Pomfrey threatened to carry him out. He left with a knot of worry, but made himself swallow it before returning to studying. With a plan of action, he actually succeeded this time. Everyone who had gone the time before easily agreed to meet there once again. Fred and George offered to bring down a breakfast from the kitchens along with Jonas, which was an immediate hit.

Because of the need to stagger their disappearances, Harry brought Neville, Hermione, Ron, and Madam Pomfrey through first, and then

waited in the bathroom under his invisibility cloak. Most of the Gryffindors showed up early, as did Lucille and Salvador, but when Luna showed up with Susan, Harry's heart jumped into his throat. He'd forgotten how he reacted to Susan. Even with short hair, she was still the prettiest girl he knew. After several minutes to get himself back together, during which Susan and Luna started talking – Susan nervous, Luna in her usual distracted manner – Harry pulled off the cloak. Susan's squeak and blush were gratifying, except for the fact that –

"Why Harry, I didn't know you and Alan were both susceptible to princhetts."

Susan took the excuse to look away and frowned at Luna. "Luna, Harry does not have a problem with princhetts."

Luna tilted her head and smiled dreamily. "But the red colour in both your cheeks says you've got them and haven't gotten rid of them."

"What do I have to do with anything?" Susan immediately defended, the traitorous colour only rising further.

"Only a pair can attract princhetts. You have to flirt to satisfy them, you know. You got them the first time around but they're getting a little flustered. Just kiss him."

Harry was sure his face was beet red; Susan turned to face him and she looked as red as he felt.

"I didn't know she'd do this, but she said you and your friends were doing some studying and I asked if I could come. Hannah is frantic, and I just wanted to take a break from bookwork. Usually you're a lot more hands on." Her colour abruptly deepened.

"No problem." Harry shook his head to rid himself of a strong mental image he did not need. "The more the merrier. If you'll give me a second,"

The door opened again, and without missing a beat, "Gee Harry, you're red in the face."

Harry felt like swearing, but didn't want to offend Susan. The twins had just come in.

"Harry's looking red? Oh, he is. Ahhh, the fair damsel."

Both walked in with something unseen resting in their arms. Behind them, Jonas also held an invisible bundle. They were looking between Harry and Susan with wicked smiles. To avoid more scrutiny, Harry turned to try and focus on the tap, but it was rather pointless when they kept talking.

"Small wonder he's red, with something so beautiful in the room. Why haven't we brought along our sweet armfuls?"

"Because neither of them wanted to waste studying time with irreverent wastrels who don't care about grades?" Jonas added. Both twins immediately protested, and Harry finally hissed the password. Susan gasped as the sink disappeared into the floor, revealing the tunnel beyond. Luna immediately stepped up and slid down, screaming for joy. Harry blushed, and stepped back, giving Susan a small half bow. She stepped up to look down it dubiously.

"Is it safe?"

"Of course it is." Harry reassured her. "I've been down there loads of times. We had a gathering just like this last week and nobody got hurt." Harry swatted at one of the twins who was miming pushing her down. "Now hurry up and go before the twins get it in their heads to push you, would you? I'll see you down there."

Susan looked behind herself worriedly and then sat down and slid after waving a short goodbye. Harry made the twins wait, and then stepped aside to let them time themselves going down. Jonas gave Harry a shrewd look before going down.

"You owe me, do you?"

"A small favour." Harry clarified, nodding. "Thank you for getting the mirrors to Blaise and Alan."

Jonas smiled thinly. "I'll keep it in mind."

Harry watched him go feeling a little out of sorts. He had needed the help. Jonas couldn't ask for anything too dangerous, not for something so small. He was just an unnerving sort of person – Harry was fairly confident Jonas had few or no friends at all in the school. He'd probably scared them all off. Still, Harry was just as confident he did not want to meet his family. He was going to have to ask what his parents knew of the Hodges one of these days.

It wasn't more than another half-hour before the rest of the group came in. Harry made himself wait until the last person was through as he had the invisibility cloak, and then he slipped down and closed it. He walked quickly through to the far room, and found them all just setting out the food. Ron immediately shouted at him,

"You forgot the second door!"

Harry stopped his flinch and made up an excuse, "I didn't want you eating all the food before I got down here!"

Everyone laughed, and Alan shook his head sadly. He'd taken the seat at the front again – everyone had sat pretty much the same as they had the last time, although Fred and George had not bothered to take a seat, and Madam Pomfrey was sitting in one of their places. She was watching the gathering as closely as some of the students were watching her, but there was a small smile across her mouth and she took the same initiative to begin the breakfast the twins had brought, not speaking up but just watching the students interact.

The food was finished off with the twins enchanting the last strawberries to fly, and Nanna, Melanie, and Dillan had grand fun chasing them. It looked too coincidental for Dillan to have run into Nanna towards the end and caught the strawberry she was after. And then when he offered to share it ... well, Harry just rolled his eyes and ignored it. He would not embarrass his sister. He would not. Because she'd kill him if he went overprotective, and he didn't think Jonas would appreciate him interfering with Dillan either.

Either way, Alan stood and made use of the glass and cutlery he'd spared from being vanished. Harry was mildly jealous of his conjuring ability, although not of his companion's requested details. The purple and yellow on Luna's plate was a little sickening, even with the green accents. The ringing sound brought everyone's attention back to the table, and Alan smiled.

"Right, we are gathered here together to learn once more. This week's teacher is going to be Madam Pomfrey. We'll be learning healing techniques."

The number of people who looked away, squirmed, or froze was very telling of how well the group gathered got along with Madam Umbridge. Susan was one of few who were confused. Nanna, Melanie, Tracey, and all but one of Stephanie's friends were also out of the loop. Madam Pomfrey stood, but Jonas spoke first.

"If we're going to be talking about this, we need something to keep those who can't keep a secret silent. Maybe some of you are suckers for pain, but if I get detention again, I want to have earned it."

"I would like to know how many of you have gotten these 'detentions' first." Madam Pomfrey asked. Her voice was steel. "I gather you have been forbidden to come to me, or to speak of it, but I would still like to know. How many?"

Soft looks were exchanged, and Blaise asked, "Do you know a spell you could use for this, Jonas?"

"Depends on what all happened that this was brought up."

Pomfrey nodded. "Harry came to ask about learning healing. He mentioned none of the reasons, but I pressed. When he said it had occurred to him during a detention with Filch, I gathered that Filch, who has been inordinately pleased with himself, had gotten permission from Umbridge to break out a whip once more."

"That's good." Jonas nodded. "But I know Harry hasn't gotten detention. Who told him?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I figured it out the same way?" Harry said blithely. He didn't think for a moment any of them would believe him, but he'd be damned if he's say it.

"I showed him." Neville quietly admitted.

Harry turned to glare at him. Was Neville trying to get himself hurt?

Jonas looked them both over, and Harry angrily continued.

"Filch took me to see Madam Umbridge the day after she became Headmistress and told me Umbridge was going to give him the freedom to use his whips and chains again. Maybe I was stupid and didn't catch on until Neville showed me, but I had everything I needed to know beforehand. And I will stand by that I figured it out myself."

Jonas was looking at him with interest now, and he quirked a small smile. "I suppose that works, then." He didn't say anything else, pulling out his wand and casting a quick spell. Several people cried out; two jumped out of their seats, and Alan and Neville both reflexively raised shields that were completely unaffected. Jonas sat back down, ignoring the rest of the now infuriated group.

"Jonas, what the Hell was that?" Alan growled. "We hadn't agreed to anything; you were out of line!"

"It's a basic secrecy spell. All of us can only speak the truth on the matter involved: Those who were uninformed can only say that as of that point they were not informed, unless they suffer the conditions to bring them to the other side of the spell, where they will be able to always say they haven't told. It's complicated. Only people who might have difficulties are Harry and Neville, but Neville never said a word, and Harry knew about it beforehand. Easily solved matter, especially since he'll probably get a detention soon enough anyways. I was mostly worried about the little Gryffs and the badger. It's taken care of. Go on."

Alan glared at him for a long moment before he jerked his hand in what had to be a rude gesture, and then turned back to addressing everyone else.

"All those who have had a detention with Filch, please raise your hands."

Roughly half did so. Most of them were Alan's direct friends; only four were not Slytherin. The only one that surprised Harry was Luna. Madam Pomfrey's lips were tight.

"So." She breathed. "Whipping, was it?"

Jonas snorted. "Well, I got to enjoy four hours hanging by my ankles too, but that's nothing new."

Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know the story behind that one.

"I was just hung like that for mine." Luna breezily answered. "Then again, the detentions weren't major. I was just odd."

Alan's tight face didn't agree with her statement, but he swallowed and just sighed. "I suppose most of the detentions were because we disagreed with the Inquisitorial Squad or wouldn't listen. I'd guess Jonas' were for something else, perhaps being an ass, but either way we disagreed with the powers-that-be. Anyways, it doesn't matter. We just want to practice the spells we went over with Geoffrey, and learn a few healing spells for a later date when we aren't being frisked as often as the owls." His gaze returned to Madam Pomfrey and she reluctantly nodded.

"Could you give me a few minutes? I brought some things I might like to set up."

"Certainly." Alan agreed easily. "We can practice some of the spells Geoffrey took us through in the meantime. Just call us over when you're ready." Alan stood, and shooed everyone from the table, following as everyone moved into the bare space near the statue. There were a few black marks on the statue from the last practice, but Alan told everyone to work on Patroni. Harry moved over to him immediately and quietly asked,

"Have you gotten any word on Regulus?"

Alan's mouth tightened. "They haven't said word one. Severus won't let me into his chambers anymore, and Geoffrey is never in; he's always at the Ministry when he has a spare moment. Ginger told me he was working on it, and that he didn't want me informed for fear of me overreacting."

Harry winced. Alan laughed bitterly.

"Yeah, it's stupid. But it's probably because of how goddamn stressed out he is. Something's wrong; I think that's why he didn't bother having her lie. Because I'd know immediately. At least I know he isn't lying to me. I need to focus. Go goose Susan to make her succeed."

Harry flinched. "Alan ..."

Alan just grinned unrepentantly. "What? Everyone knows you like her."

"But what about Daphne?"

"You can goose her too. Get."

Alan gave him a shove and Harry stumbled away. Susan was struggling. It probably didn't help that she blushed hard enough to make herself sway slightly when she noticed Harry looking her way. However, she tried again to create a patronus and managed a half-solid form, partway through the air. When she found it forming, she yelped and lost it. Harry managed to clear his throat enough to say, "Good job," and then moved past her and stopped. He was staring at a very familiar looking lizard whose head reached his collarbone. Looking past the silver patronus, Harry found himself looking at a conflicted Neville. He blinked quietly, and Neville shrugged before letting the creature dissipate. Harry smiled truly as he said, "Good job."

Neville shrugged awkwardly again, and walked past Harry with a quiet, "I'll go check on Susan, then. You two would die of embarrassment."

Harry tried to maintain his composure, but was saved when Ron screamed and someone laughed out loud. Harry turned, and his lips quirked. Julianna had managed her patronus again, then. Ron was less than pleased with the silver acromantula that had purposefully scurried over to his area.

Alan called out and everyone let their patroni subside. In the momentary silence, Jonas called out, “We should get a boggart in here. Someone’s gotta have a dementor fear we can practice against. Wouldn’t hurt to practice against boggarts either. Some people haven’t owned up to their fears.”

Harry’s eyes found Neville without thinking and Neville was pale and sweating even thinking about it. Harry wasn’t sure what to think of his. Would it remain his fear of James? Would it have changed? He didn’t know. Several others looked nervous as well, and Alan’s considering eyes seemed to be weighing the pros and cons. Harry offered his thoughts.

“Would we have a promise to not use each others fears against them?”

Jonas sneered. “Scared for yourself?”

Harry eyed him flatly.

“Jonas, you still don’t like facing your own, you pussy.” Dillan called. “And Nicholas said you used to be terrified of him. At least now you’re one of those who’s scared of a dementor.”

Jonas opened his mouth and shut it quickly with a glare at Dillan. Harry hadn’t thought anyone had the gall to jibe Jonas. Harry suspected it was because Nanna looked mildly sick. What was she scared of? Harry didn’t know. He felt mildly ashamed of the fact, but shook it off when he reminded himself she didn’t know his either. Of course, his was currently in limbo … or he hoped so, at least.

Either way, Jonas hadn’t moved to injure Dillan, something Harry suspected was both a good thing and very uncommon. Alan walked back over – Harry hadn’t seen him leave, but apparently he’d gone to

check in with Madam Pomfrey – and he quickly commanded everyone's attention again.

"Madam Pomfrey will be ready in a few minutes, so just idle about. Snog against the pillars, feel each other up out of sight, but don't get too distracted." Alan nodded, and then cut through the groups to meet Harry. Harry stuck out his tongue, but smiled and Alan smiled back before commenting, "Do you think Jonas is aware his spell failed on at least seven people?"

Harry tilted his head and thought about it. He hadn't felt anything when Jonas had cast the spell. "Did he miss on purpose?"

Alan shook his head. "It was like a net, but it just suddenly developed holes where some people sat. The only difference was when it hit Blaise and Julianna. Both of them just had the net ... flow around them without sticking. But for you, myself, Raina, Neville and Salvador it was like it suddenly developed convenient holes."

"Aren't we all the highest in strength?"

Alan frowned. "Jonas is stronger than Blaise and Julianna. Raina is about equal; Salvador is a little weaker. Neville is easily the strongest after us, although Hermione isn't far behind him. However, she is under the spell."

"Perhaps knowledge plays a part?" Harry offered.

"Luna is under it ..." Alan commented, but he was clearly thinking. "I suppose it would. Blaise is just strong enough to resist, I suppose."

"And stubborn enough."

Alan looked over at Harry's smile and nodded shortly. "That too. C'mon, the cookies aren't coming out until we're done."

Harry grinned at the reminder that Alan could cook, and Madam Pomfrey called to the students, bringing everyone back to the table. Harry smiled far more vindictively as he moved up next to Jonas.

Jonas flinched a moment as he looked at him, but after a second he just nodded shortly.

Harry felt inordinately pleased at the acknowledgement. Jackass or not, foiling Jonas was no small thing. Even if it was accidental. But he still owed him that favour ...

A/N: Yeah, sorry, late. *ducks head* Much apologied! But here's a bit more conflict, a bit more scary, and moving on towards the inevitable. Gotta love it. Thank you for reading, and much thanks for those who review!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-three

Their get together was the last event of the break, and on Monday they had school once more, and Career Advice from their teachers. Harry's time was during his free period after lunch, just before Defence. Going in, he almost swallowed his tongue to find Umbridge sitting in the corner with a clipboard. McGonagall glanced up at him.

"Potter, sit down. We are here to discuss what your plans are for your career after graduation and what classes you should take in sixth and seventh years." She looked at him sternly over her glasses. "Have you given any thought to that?"

Umbridge's quill was very distracting, but with McGonagall looking ready to jump him if he so much as twitched in that direction, he felt it best to strive to ignore it himself. He did not need a detention.

"I ... I'm not really sure." Harry admitted. "I ..." Harry sighed, his gaze drifting towards Umbridge until McGonagall gently started tapping her fingers on her desk. Harry frowned at her, but finally spoke up, "I kind of thought I'd just take everything I qualified for and leave my options open. I can't really decide right now."

McGonagall looked at him with an inscrutable look. "That would mean a fair bit of work, Mr. Potter, depending on how well you do on your OWLs. Are you willing to do all that you qualify for?"

"Yes." Harry answered. "I'm pretty confident in the grades I'll get. Being an Auror takes at least five OWLs, and a Healer needed ... I can't remember. Es in a bunch of things."

McGonagall blinked at the two choices, and quickly sorted out the Healer's pamphlet. "You'd need NEWT Es in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defence Against the Dark Arts. It is much the same as the Aurors, but the NEWTs are very difficult tests that are not to be taken lightly."

Harry nodded, and smiled. "I know. Professor McGonagall, I have Hermione and Neville as friends. They're as stern about grades as you are."

McGonagall's face tightened, but Harry suspected she was fighting not to smile. Both had no difficulty losing their mirth as Umbridge gave a faint cough, and McGonagall turned briskly back to the pamphlet, ignoring Umbridge's expectant look. "I'm sure your father can easily talk you through the requirements for the Aurors, but a Healer ... a Healer is demanding in much the same way, however you will be dealing with people often at their worst. Nobody in need of a Healer will be very pleased with the situation."

"I can't imagine an Auror feeling extremely welcomed." Harry offered. "I see your point. It was a thought. The other things I had in mind were Curse-Breaking or maybe Law." Harry snorted. "If I manage to fail my NEWTs, at least I've got a fall back."

McGonagall snorted as well, and found the two pamphlets. "Curse-Breaking requires an E in Arithmancy, Mr. Potter. Professor Vector has been grading you between E and A, so you'll need to pick up a fraction in order to qualify. Perhaps study with your friends a bit more. Law is not quite as easy as you think; you would need to at least have an OWL in History – yes, History of Magic Potter. The class you tend to sleep through,"

"Alongside everyone but the Ravenclaws." Harry groused.

McGonagall nodded slightly in acknowledgment, but continued, "I don't believe Politics have any requirements past a bloodline, however, so if you're willing,"

Umbridge coughed again, but was talked over,

"You just need to be able to weather the waters and you could probably find a niche for yourself."

"Unless I get the desire to be chewed upon by barracudas, it's unlikely to happen anytime soon." Harry sighed. "Is there anything about my class work to be picking up, other than my Arithmancy?"

"You're doing fine in most of your classes. In History of Magic you are not doing very well at all," McGonagall was smiling, so Harry

supposed she found Binns as impossible as the students, "Hagrid is enthused to have you in his class – you have top marks, as well as in Defence and Potions, surprisingly."

Harry smiled wryly, "I'm working with Alan, what do you expect? He's great at Potions."

McGonagall gave him a long, searching look, but with Harry's peaceful smile, she just turned back to her paper. "You are also doing very well in Transfiguration. Charms and Herbology are typically being graded around an E. You are almost at a O in everything else." She put down the paper and turned back to him. "I take no one with less than an E; Snape refuses to take anyone with less than an O into his NEWT classes. As it stands, I'd say you would probably have seven or eight NEWTs that you qualify for. For Healer or Auror, you will want to take at least five classes: Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Defence, and Herbology. You will most certainly qualify for Care of Magical Creatures, and if you put in some effort, you will also qualify for Arithmancy and Astronomy. History of Magic would take some dedication, but I'm certain Hermione and Neville have some notes for you if you want to study up on it. As it stands, you are doing very well."

She smiled thinly at him, but it was a real smile. Harry smiled warmly back, ignoring the scratching of Umbridge's quill. Harry tilted his head a moment, considering, but shook it off before nodded and leaving, the advice done. He felt Umbridge's eyes track his back all the way out. He wondered grumpily if showering in the afternoon would be too much.

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The evening would have been a lot less interesting if Fred and George hadn't taken the return to classes as an excuse to begin their reign of havoc. As everyone came out of classes, there were shocked exclamations and admiring words along the fifth floor. Harry came down without encountering it, but heard about a large swamp now occupying the corridor of Gregory the Smarmy. Delivered before classes let out, nobody could prove the culprits no matter how obvious it was.

Three days later, during dinner, the students began to scream. Harry looked down when a familiar, deafening shriek sounded: Nanna! He was up and halfway there before she stopped and ran to clutch onto him, hyperventilating and shrilly demanding,

“Harry, there’s snakes under the table! Get them under control!”

Harry pushed her aside and crouched, and there were indeed snakes of the long and colourful variety. Harry commanded, “Stop!”

The hiss was familiar to his ears, and a sudden clamour started, as the snakes wondered who on earth had said that, where they were, what was happening …

“Where did you come from” Harry asked.

Several spoke of a forest, someone hauling them from their burrows and then blackness. And then there was light, and all the chaos of the Great Hall. Feet were all around and someone kicking the small box where they were crowded inside, so they came out and tried to find the exit through the sea of legs. Some had been considering biting when he spoke up. Harry’s head hurt at the implications.

“Please, come here. I’ll take you to a man who will return you to the forest.” Harry gently pushed Nanna away and let the snakes come over. There were seven of them, one a two headed Runespoor, and another that looked like an adder. Four had crawled up his arms when it was clear the heavily muscled creatures would be a little much. Neville crouched next to him, and Harry directed the last onto him, one of which was the runespoor that took a small nudge to get over. Neville watched it carefully. When Harry straightened, he realized the snakes had been not even half of his worries.

The air was humming as students shot spells through the air at black doxies and blue pixies. Slytherin had completely vacated, and dark, powerful spells were splitting the air as several students screamed. The teachers had all moved to Slytherin; something was creating horrible chaos, something that had to be more dangerous, and Hagrid was booming with worry. Harry looked at Neville and sighed. “Great.”

The snakes on his shoulders hissed at him with curiosity and Harry realized he was still speaking parseltongue. He huffed, and turned to actually look at Neville, hoping that would straighten out his language. “Any clue what’s happening?”

Neville looked at him curiously, and Harry huffed angrily. Neville just laughed.

“Oh, this is funny. Can’t you speak English?”

Harry hissed several foul deprecations under his breath, and one of the snakes, fortunately non-venomous, nipped his ear and scolded him. Harry growled.

“Freaking great, I get a mothering snake on my shoulder. I can’t even swear in parseltongue.”

And only when everyone laughed did he realize he was back in English. Cursing the talent, Harry just straightened and then gasped in horror as the Hufflepuff table scattered with panicked screams. Only then did he see the smaller black acromantula. He practically shut down.

‘What idiot brought acromantula into the school? Fred and George wouldn’t do that, so whom ...’

Jonas.

That shithead.

Harry swore, and Neville looked pale, before he turned to Harry with wide eyes. They were the most powerful Gryffindor students, especially since the seventh years looked panicked, those that hadn’t immediately gone to help the teachers. Harry quickly crouched again and asked the snakes to find a corner and wait there while they dealt with something else. Harry looked quickly at Fred and George to settle on English once more.

"Everyone out of the way, the snakes are going to the corner. We're going to help the teachers. Keep back if you can."

He didn't wait and quickly jumped over the table to hex down the acromantula that had come onto the Hufflepuff table. Neville followed and moved down to the other side, hexing another. Unfortunately, both got back up, and Pomfrey shrieked,

"I don't care about Hagrid's worry, kill the things!"

Harry didn't have any problem when it scuttled towards several second years. The splatter certainly did nothing for the tables. Neville's was stuck in stasis; he'd used impedimentia. Harry summoned the box the snakes had told him about, and then banished at Neville. He caught it and then scrunched his nose, before levitating the spider inside and gently shutting it, in case more were caught alive. It seemed that pretty much all of them were dealt with, though, and the teachers were furious. Two were more than enough for Harry to want to deal with. Madam Pomfrey left immediately with Draco, Pansy, and several other Slytherin students floating behind her. Harry presumed they'd been bitten. There had been no snakebites thanks to him, other than the small one on his ear. With the acromantula gone, the teachers quickly got the doxies and pixies under control, with only a few bites from the doxies that were sent with a prefect on their way as well.

Finally, the Great Hall was back under control and clearly both McGonagall and Umbridge were furious. They moved off arguing, along with most staff, until a Slytherin shouted out, "Nothing happened to the Gryffindors! The stupid twins are trying to kill us!"

Harry had had enough of the stress. "Listen you toebrain," He hollered, "just because someone apparently forgot Gryffindor had a parseltongue doesn't mean nothing happened! Would you have rather added snakebites to the problem? Fred and George aren't this goddamned malicious, so shut your filthy mouth!"

He stormed around and irritably ordered Melanie to go fetch Hagrid over there and returned to the gathered snakes. The same four crawled up his arms, and the rest climbed the ever-patient Neville

who had said nothing about his vociferous complaint. Melanie returned with Hagrid quickly, just in time for Umbridge to come over as well. She glared at him, but paused a good distance back at the sight of Harry and Neville quite literally crawling with snakes. The smaller black one on Harry's shoulder clung through his hair to rear up on top of his head and hiss at her using language Harry hadn't heard before either. The motherly one, grey and green of unknown species, grumbled and slung herself over his shoulders. Umbridge finally got her act together.

"So, if you seem so certain the twins wouldn't do that, perhaps you did?"

"Madam Umbridge, I do not know how to enchant a stasis box, and you'd know if I tried to get one into the school." Harry answered, rigidly polite. "You may feel free to inspect both; one has been handed over to Hagrid with one of the small acromantula, and the other should be under the Slytherin table. I would not subject the school to such chaos nor would I subject creatures I respect to the same. You're probably looking for a seventh year as they're actually capable of such magic."

Umbridge bristled again, but Hagrid had arrived, and Harry smiled and nodded at him. "Hagrid, would you be able to take these snakes back to the forest, or do you need some help doing so?" Hagrid was holding the two boxes he'd mentioned, probably with the remaining acromantula inside.

Hagrid did a double take at the snakes clustered on Harry and Neville and then nodded. "Ye should probably come wit' me, if you can. The snake's might not like the company I've got." He hefted the two boxes and sighed. "O' course," Hagrid rumbled, "Tha's if the Headmistress will let ye."

Harry looked to Umbridge and met her eyes with the blandest look he could. He needed to take care of the snakes. He could not afford to get angry with her. Surprisingly, the weight of the snakes and their dry scales made him feel almost peaceful, so he easily waited the long minutes she made him wait, clearly unwilling to let him go, but apparently at a loss of how else to deal with the snakes.

"Alright." She fluttered. "You and Mr. Longbottom may go, but come back quickly once they're back in the forest."

Harry nodded shortly, and then turned and trotted in Hagrid's wake as they went out to the forest. The snakes didn't want to go; the black one that had claimed his head, and the motherly one that had bitten his ear were most enamoured of him, and the two-headed runespoor easily wanted his and Neville's attention – Neville had been just as interested. Harry finally sighed, looking between them, and then caved.

"There should be a rock over by the lake you can sunbathe on. While we're here during the year, we might be able to go over there and I can translate for you to chat. I don't know when we'll be able to get there, though."

The runespoor and the others were more than happy at the gesture and left, Neville smiling warmly at Harry for the chance to look over the magical snake. Hagrid thanked them for the help, rubbing at his eyes over the acromantula that had been killed, and shooed them back to the school. As they walked, Harry sighed heavily, and Neville quietly asked,

"That was probably Jonas, wasn't it?"

"The Slytherins bitten were Inquisitorial Squad." Harry offered. "The snakes were right beneath my sister. The doxies and pixies were at the end of the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. The only serious damage done was to the Inquisitorial Squad – the Ravenclaw members are segregated to the end of the table and the doxies were placed there – you saw the box." Neville nodded. "Only two snakes were poisonous, none were very long. The Runespoor was missing the third head that has poison. He knew I'd immediately go to my sister, although I'm not sure he knew she'd panic. I didn't know she'd panic like that, but with me over there, the snakes wouldn't hurt anyone."

Neville sighed. "He does have reason to be angry with the Inquisitorial Squad, and ..."

"He'd do something that malicious."

Neville's mouth quirked. "He's a bully. I've heard it from the Ravenclaw prefects. But he's a very smart one. He keeps people scared of him, and he doesn't give the teachers reason to censure him, hence his prefect status. He's kept a low profile for a long time."

"He's never seemed that way when I've run into him." Harry offered quietly.

"We're stronger than him, magically, and I know a lot of spells, enough to probably hold my own against him. I never felt anything when he cast that spell, so I suspect it didn't stick – spells like that always feel like something."

"It didn't take on you, me, Alan, Blaise, Salvador, Julianna, or Raina." Harry offered. "Alan saw it."

Neville shot Harry a look and stopped. "Alan saw it?"

Harry winced. He hadn't told Neville about that. After several minutes of staring, Neville asked again, "Alan saw it? He hadn't cast a magic seeing spell. Harry, that's impossible." It was a question, not disbelief. Harry kept his lips shut, and then quietly said,

"It's Alan's to tell. Not mine. I shouldn't have said it."

Neville stared at him for several moments longer. "Maybe it would have been better if Jonas' spell had taken on you. You say a lot you shouldn't, no matter how many times Alan tries to teach you otherwise."

Harry winced, but still tried to outwait Neville. He knew it was problem. He was trying, really, but ...

Neville finally shook his head again. "Alright, fine. Jonas isn't a bully because he knows we won't give in to that, and thus we are better allies. Now, we need to get inside so we won't get in trouble."

Harry nodded shortly, and followed as Neville led the way. They came inside, and found Umbridge smiling saccharinely.

“Late, are we?” Neither boy spoke up. “Tut, tut. We can’t have that. Detention, both of you. You can go down right now, to remind yourselves to keep on your toes.”

Harry felt anger in the pit of his stomach. The snakes weren’t there to keep him calm, but Neville suddenly grabbed onto his arm painfully tightly and sent him a stern look. Umbridge looked between them and smiled even wider.

“My my, Mr. Longbottom. What have I said about sharing?”

Harry growled. “He never said a word, just like everyone else. I’m just hating you because I can.” Harry smiled sickly. “Promise.” His eyes flicked to Filch, who was smiling too brightly, and he let a large smile cross his face. “Besides, Filch was bragging about it. It wasn’t a stretch.”

Filch’s face grew ugly, and Umbridge looked to him. He shrugged. “It’s been my dream for years.”

“It’s kind of obvious you could buy him with that.”

Madam Umbridge frowned down at him. “I suppose you’ll have to have a detention for being disrespectful as well.”

Neville made a strangled sound. Harry didn’t really care anymore.

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“Harry, you’re bleeding.”

Harry ignored Neville’s admonition as he pulled his cloak on without bothering with his shirt. He could feel the blood just fine himself.

“Harry …” Neville’s voice fell into a sigh, and he pushed off the wall to walk unsteadily beside Harry. He was still a little woozy from hanging upside down for two hours, and his ankles hurt. On Harry’s part, it

was his wrists that hurt, and he suspected he wouldn't be sleeping on his back for the next week. "Harry, you're not going to tell your mother about that, are you?"

"No." Harry stubbornly maintained. "And you won't be telling her either. My parents do not need to go to Azkaban right now. With Dumbledore out of commission, things are bad enough. Unless things get worse—"

Neville laughed bitterly. Harry stopped walking in surprise, and Neville calmed and turned a bitter smile, his eyes gleaming darkly. "Worse? You want this to get worse? Wait until you have a detention with Umbridge there. The only way that could get worse would be if the attendant were Bellatrix Lestrange."

Harry blinked. Neville hadn't mentioned Bellatrix before, and the context he'd chosen... Harry tossed a few possibilities around and felt his stomach sink as he remembered the blood quill of the first few weeks. "Is she really that sadistic?" Harry asked.

Neville just shook his head and led the way out of the dungeons without answering. His silence was answer enough, and Harry hurried along behind him, wincing slightly. Oh, he was so not carrying his book bag. When Harry caught up, Neville just quietly said,

"I won't mention it. I see your point."

Harry wasn't sure that was such a good thing after all.

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Two weeks later, Hagrid stopped Harry after a Care of Magical Creatures class and asked him to come into his hut. He'd apparently found an ashwinder he wanted Harry to talk to. Harry curiously agreed, but found no ashwinder in his hut. Instead, Hagrid, as beat up and forlorn as he had been for several weeks now, sat down and offered Harry a cup of tea. Harry hesitantly accepted, and then reminded himself he was free of Umbridge for as long as she suspected he was helping Hagrid with an ashwinder. Since she didn't think he liked her, he hoped she'd not try and interfere when he could

command a snake around without her knowing what he was saying. Harry took the tea and smiled.

"What did you need me for, Hagrid, if you haven't got an ashwinder?"

"Well," Hagrid shifted guiltily, and then apparently remembered something. "Those snakes you saved have been hangin' about the lake."

Harry blinked. That can't have been what was concerning him. "I told them to, because it's a good sunning spot, and me and Neville might visit if we ever got the chance. They liked us, and he's very interested in the runespoor, two-headed or not. We've been down there once, but we don't have much free time currently."

Hagrid grunted, and abruptly remembered to add a teabag to the water. "Righ', righ'. Well, Harry are yeh- are yeh willin' to do something for me?"

Remembering Jonas, Harry cautiously answered, "If I can, yes, but I'd have to know what it was."

Hagrid nodded carefully, "Thank ye, thank ye, Harry. Yeh see, yeh know I'm to be getting' the sack any day now, righ'?"

Harry could easily see that happening, so he nodded solemnly. "Umbridge's against anyone for Dumbledore, and you're most definitely on the list, I'd say." It was true, and better than saying he wasn't the safest teacher.

Hagrid smiled wanly at him. "Yeah, I suppose so. I suppose so. But if I could, I'd leave right now so she can't do to me like she did to Trelawney, in front of the whole school. But I've got business here, and —and I wanted to ask yeh if yeh'd help me wit' it if I were to get the sack."

Harry blinked. "What business is it? How could I help?"

Hagrid smiled wetly at him. "I'd much rather introduce yeh, but since I can't get yeh away withou' creatin' more trouble, I'll just have ter tell

ya. I wouldn't if I didn't have ter, but I can't leave without someone knowin'. I'd prefer yeh to bring yer friends in as well if yeh could, but ... anyways, yeh see Harry, when I came back I, er ..."

"What, Hagrid?" Harry smiled gently. "I don't think Ashwinders would be extremely difficult, and I don't need another detention."

Hagrid huffed, and wouldn't look at him. "I found out I had a brother, well, a half-brother when –when me and Olympe found the giants."

Harry blinked. Oh, please no ...

"I had ter bring him back wit' me, Harry, the other giants were bullying 'im for being so small."

Harry put his head in his hands. "You brought your brother back with you?"

Hagrid nodded carefully. "He's just so small, and if – I've been tryin' to teach him some manners, ye see, and how to speak. He's really important to me,"

"Hagrid, has he been why you're so bruised?" He then remembered Firenze's warning, "And the centaurs ..."

Hagrid bristled. "Yeh'd think Firenze would be more careful in remembering that I saved his sorry hide when his herd turned on him."

"Hagrid, please." As interesting as that was, "Are you sure you're getting anywhere with this? If he doesn't want to be here, what can I do? A runty giant is far bigger than I am, and most spells aren't going to work on him and if they did they'd only make him angrier!"

Hagrid sagged. "I can't jus' leave him like that, though. He has been getting better. He's settlin' down, listenin'. I guess you can't go out there and talk to him much, but ... at least know he's there, would ya?"

Harry sighed. "I can do that. If you'll let me tell my parents if an emergency happens, I'm sure they can help you get him ... somewhere else, maybe. Keep him safe." Harry forced a smile. "You may not have to worry about it at all. There's only so much time until the end of the year, and I'm sure things will pick up then. Maybe Umbridge won't sack you before then." He doubted Umbridge would survive the summer. He'd only have to tell his father if he wanted to make sure of it.

Hagrid sniffled, and shrugged. Harry finished his tea and stood, smiling as reassuringly as he could. He hesitated, and then offered, "Would you like me to bring Neville, Hermione, and or Ron down? With my cloak, you could ... you could introduce us." He really didn't want to ...

Hagrid pulled out his large handkerchief and blew his nose. "It's a good offer, Harry, but I don't wan' you to get in more trouble on my account. I –I suppose yer right. She doesn't have much time left to sack me, so – so everything should be alrigh'. Dumbledore will have somethin' planned to get back here. Dumbledore will know what to do."

Harry didn't argue. Dislike Dumbledore he might, but the man usually did have a plan. And if it kept him from dancing with giants, Harry was all for it.

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Harry was most grateful that Saturday was a Quidditch match. He was quite certain he'd have gone mad had he been unable to fly during this year, and the euphoria of winning the Quidditch Cup simply made his day. While Jonas did truly decimate their chasers when he wasn't avoiding the twins' bludgers, their seeker couldn't beat Harry, something Ron was grateful for. Ron flinched when Jonas came to score, especially now that he'd met the boy. Gryffindor had naturally celebrated the win, and Hermione had given them the weekend to do so before she descended upon them alongside the teachers, as everything became review for the OWLs.

At McGonagall's recommendation, Harry began to heavily revise for Arithmancy and History, asking Neville, Hermione, and Blaise to help him go over the numbers and details relentlessly, determined to bring up his grades in both. Alan helped some with Arithmancy, but he wasn't the least bit interested in bothering with the History OWL. Daphne was most willing to work with Harry on History as they gathered at the table in the Library, and while a few others pitched in, nobody bothered to try and take her spot right next to Harry.

As for Harry, he just appreciated the help. If it came from a pretty face, all the better. He almost got very lost when he contemplated his division in attention between Daphne and Susan, but he forced that aside. Time enough after the OWLs were over to figure out his hormones. If Daphne kept brushing her chest across his arm to point out a fact he needed to remember, well ... he'd just deal. It definitely caught his attention.

Finally, the examiners arrived. The school was quivering as they came in, talking with Umbridge, although some seemed far more interested in Dumbledore and less than friendly with the toad, and providing indelible proof that they were going to be tested. Harry felt something small stick itself in his throat and twitch occasionally.

Well. He hoped the revision paid off.

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Charms was first. Harry wasn't sure he'd done as well as he could have: several questions had left him feeling confused, and he'd never been particularly skilled at getting his charms exact, but he felt comfortable that he'd at least passed, and done well. He just doubted he'd get an Outstanding. Listening to Neville and Hermione debate the questions and their merits, Harry just laughed and shrugged it off, letting them mock him a few moments and then waving him off with Ron to go fly. Ron wasn't nearly as comfortable with his spell casting as Harry, so the exams were leaving him with a bad case of nerves.

They got to the pitch and Harry smiled and waved at Tracey and Theodore, who were also taking a chance to do some leisurely flying

rather than the pell-mell contest of Quidditch. Harry and Ron joined them quite happily, Harry actually looking forward to tomorrow.

Harry took to Transfiguration like a fish to water; he was confident his Defence test would feel the same, but in between he had to worry about Herbology, where he quite lacked any ease in the skill. Managing with only a small bite from a fanged geranium left him with a faint smile, one that crossed over as he passed the next day's Defence exams with a wide grin. Alan, being alphabetically next, met him as they walked out to discuss their prospects. Harry smiled at him.

"Feeling overconfident yet?"

"Not yet." Alan returned, stretching again. "Ancient Runes tomorrow. Wait, yeah." He grinned. "Overconfident it is. I'm good at those. I'll be feeling less peachy next week when we take the Arithmancy exam and History."

"How's Blaise?"

"Griping. He hated Charms; has no finesse for it. Daphne is confident she will be eaten by whatever they bring up for Care of Magical Creatures, and she wasn't happy going into Defence either. Unlike you and me, she's not nearly so comfortable."

"Fair enough. You looking forward to Potions?"

Alan gave him an innocently bewildered look. "Aren't you?"

Harry snorted. "Not hardly. Just because I'm sure I know all I can doesn't mean I'll get the Outstanding I need."

Alan sighed. "Harry, Harry, Harry. You just need to remind him you can actually do the work and I'm sure he'll take you even with an E." Alan tilted his head. "I could make him, you know."

"You won't!" Harry snapped. "I'll get in on my own merits, or I won't get in at all. I don't need help."

Alan quickly raised his hands. "Sorry, sorry. Thought I'd offer."

"Well don't. I'll do fine." Harry shot him a glare. "And I'll get an Outstanding. See if I don't."

He stubbornly ignored Alan's wry smile as he stalked away.

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Friday was free for Harry and Ron, although most of the others had their Ancient Runes exam. Harry happily took the chance to whine that he was friends with a bunch of overachievers to Ron, but felt mildly offended when Ron just started laughing at him. After several minutes, Harry just huffed and sighed. All right. Ron was probably right. He was sometimes as bad as the rest of them.

It was still no reason to laugh that hard.

Monday brought the Potions OWL Harry was dreading. It was blessedly easier than he thought it would be, but he definitely worked on it. The written was a little harder than the practical, but after it was over, Harry indeed felt hopeful he had gotten the Outstanding he said he would. Again, he was at least confident he'd passed, a blessing in and of itself.

Next was Care of Magical Creatures –no, there was nothing carnivorous- and then written Astronomy, another class Harry did not like but fortunately did not need either, followed by his Arithmancy exam and then the Astronomy practical. With his brain feeling wrung out after the gruelling number work, Harry was a little woozy as he went between his telescope and star chart. As such, he was focused on his work and made a nasty smear when he heard Fang's distant, booming barks. Looking down across the grounds, Harry could make out a crowd of people outside Hagrid's cabin. He bit his lower lip.

Shit.

Harry determinedly returned to his work. He could do nothing for him, dammit. Admittedly, it was a lost cause to refocus, but he managed something.

He was determining the position of another star when a loud bang startled him into ramming his glasses against the telescope. Furiously he swiped them off, swearing under his breath and quickly tapping them so the built-in charms straightened them back out. He slipped them back on and gaped at the fight on Hagrid's stoop. At least five wizards were casting spells, and one of the figures highlighted by her red spells was Umbridge.

One of the yells reached the parapets, "Be reasonable, Hagrid."

"Reasonable be damned, you won't take me like this Dawlish!"

Fang's small outline was fighting as well, but he wasn't nearly as resistant to spells as Hagrid; a stunner dropped him, bringing a cry of rage from Hagrid. Laying about himself with his fists at his size, his assailants dropped, unconscious where they landed.

The castle opened once more, and McGonagall hurried out. Her cries were softer through distance, but no less severe. "How dare you! How dare you!"

The Aurors turned and at least four stunners hit her at once. Harry choked on his own throat. Stunning was not gentle; four at once would injure him at fifteen. There was no telling what it would do to someone her age.

"Galloping gargoyles!" Professor Tofty shouted. "Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behaviour!"

"Cowards!" Hagrid howled. "Ruddy cowards! Have some of that- and that!"

The last of the Aurors fell; the only one standing stepped back and tripped, leaving Umbridge to cast after Hagrid alone. Hagrid bent and picked up Fang before turning and running out the gate, leaving the school behind.

Harry didn't think any of the students really got any work done in the last five minutes. They were too busy thinking; too busy wondering

just what kind of horrible Headmistress the ministry had stuck them with.

A/N: Sorry it's late! I was finishing up my novel for NaNoWriMo and changing over the calender made me forget to mark the date right.
whimpers and ducks head Sorry sorry. Once into sixth year, it will be weekly updates, whether my beta gets it back to me or not. I have reread over it, so I'm fair sure the mistakes will be caught. So, keep up with me here. We've got a few more chapters until the inevitable.
grins I hope you like this, admittedly short chapter - trust me, I think the next chapter will make up for it.

Please Read & Review! Makes me feel loved. Might make me so loved I decide to move the schedule ahead ... *wink*

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-four

Harry would have to forgive Alan, but he was quite certain the British boy was absolutely mad for insisting on relearning about History, because it was thick, difficult, cyclical and boring as Hell. Alan was struggling to stay awake through the History OWL, and he'd had to skip at least three questions already. Most of what he could answer was, incidentally, what he'd overheard everyone reminding Harry of over the past weeks. However, his headache was not helping matters any.

Another look at the front proved the hourglass to be seemingly no farther than it had been the last time he'd looked at it. The sand was trickling through it far too slowly to be normal. Someone had to have jinxed it. He was ignoring the fact that it was charmed against such interference, and forgot his complaints as his head throbbed painfully again. The disruption last night had kept the school buzzing for hours. It had resulted in a fight in the Slytherin common room as Alan's friends had taken offence to Umbridge's underhanded tactics. The sixth and fourth years involved had detention all morning, hanging by their ankles; the only reason the seventh and fifth didn't was because of the tests. Either way, it meant Alan had only had two hours of sleep at best, disturbed by nightmares of last year. His head felt like someone had used it as an anvil, and he couldn't concentrate at all.

He pinched himself again and glared down at the most recent question. It was clear for about thirty seconds before his vision went hazy again. His head throbbed it's worst yet; he pressed his hands to his face and it felt like his right eye was replaced by acid. Red light washed over his eyelids as he began to panic, images cleared behind his eyes. He thought for a minute he was remembering last year again, because a bloody body was curled on the floor before him, shirtless and bloody, pants tattered, but the person lifted their head and Alan's heart stopped.

It was Regulus.

“Another pity there is no one to help you.”

Alan growled as Voldemort's sibilant voice crooned.

"You know what I want, Alan. Bring the locket to the Department of Mysteries. Don't you want your Godfather back?"

Alan ground his teeth through the pain. Okay, voices in his head, but he knew whose voice it was. He knew this was a vision, knew Voldemort was in control. But he didn't doubt the truth of it. Alan lashed out, felt the strike cross the barrier and Voldemort, his presence tight on the fringes of Alan's mind, flinched. The image was direct, the connection was direct.

"He will be given back alive, in one piece, or there is no deal. I'll destroy the locket." Alan threw at Voldemort's feeler, "I'll attach it to a portkey so if your bargain's false, you won't get it – it'll go straight to Dumbledore."

Voldemort laughed, but it was bitter. Alan felt the nervousness – the locket was important to him, very important.

"Bring the locket, and you will have your Godfather, alive, and in one piece. Come alone to the Ministry this evening – I'll meet you in the Department of Mysteries, boy."

"Cocky bastard, aren't you?" Alan shot. Voldemort laughed – the feeling was like glass in his mind, and Alan threw the strongest barrier at the shattered wall. Voldemort's presence became strangled, and then fled. The breach sealed immediately, leaving a raw feeling against his mind, and then Alan remembered to open his eyes, that he was in the middle of an OWL.

The light stabbed into his sensitive eyes – his head was throbbing, his eyes tearing up, and he was so disoriented he felt sick. Trying to stand and leave before he vomited on the floor, Alan's head spun. He wasn't aware of hitting the floor until Professor Tofty was standing next to him, looking down at him in concern. Harry turned from his seat ahead of Alan and stared worriedly, his eyes abruptly widening at the sight of Alan's face. Alan didn't ask what he saw; his right eye was burning furiously and must have been very red. He could feel the tears still weeping down his face. Weakly, Alan offered,

"Sorry. I fell asleep; I couldn't – couldn't sleep last night, and- " Alan abruptly shut his mouth as the pain crested in his face, making his stomach roil again. "Please, hospital wing?" He weakly whispered.

Professor Tofty didn't hesitate, and pulled him out of the room. Alan couldn't bring himself to try and stand, and Professor Tofty finally huffed. "I'm sorry, son, but I can't carry you. You can either try to walk, or I can use a levitating spell. Are you sure you wish to leave your exam as it is?"

Alan nodded weakly, and attempted to stand again. He was easily taller than the examiner, and as he carefully regained his balance, he sighed heavily, and nodded again, stronger. "I'm no good at History. That'll be as much as I can get done. I think I can walk on my own, but ..."

"I'll escort you." He nodded, and led the way up to the Hospital wing.

Alan followed with shaking limbs, trying to control his impending panic. When Harry had told him – how long ago, a month, two? – that Aurors had captured Regulus, he had thought it couldn't get worse. He'd heard from Geoffrey that Regulus had disappeared from the holding cells, and he'd been worried, but Geoffrey had lit into him that everyone was looking for him – he was hauling in some of his siblings and the reserves at Salem, so Alan should just focus on school, and Alan, confident in their ability, had believed him and subsided. He could forgive Geoffrey and Severus for not having time to talk, not filling him in, and with the amount of homework he had, he didn't miss them so he hadn't ever pressed. He had thought they'd found Regulus, and he'd just missed them when they could've told him. Now ...

"Here, son. Just inside, alright?"

Alan smiled at the old professor and nodded, slipping inside and approaching Pomfrey, who was sitting at her desk, reading over some papers. Professor Tofty left him there to return to supervising the test. Madam Pomfrey clucked her tongue as she looked up at him.

"Why Mr. Prince, you of all people I hadn't expected to get worked up over a test. Sit on the bed over there, and I'll get you something to calm you down."

Alan sat obediently. A calming draught would not hurt right now, and he needed to think. He had to tell someone; he was not walking into this alone, and he needed to figure out how to get the locket and a portkey activator, because he knew the locket had been destroyed with basilisk venom months ago. Why didn't ... Regulus hadn't been informed. He'd been too worked up over Alan and Voldemort. Alan knew of its destruction because Severus had told him Dumbledore had asked for all his stored basilisk venom, and Severus had demanded to know what it was for. To destroy Voldemort, Severus had given up them all, and gone back to arguing with Green for some of what he'd drawn. So Regulus didn't know, so Voldemort didn't know. God, how... What...

Alan clutched his head and moaned again. Madam Pomfrey clucked her tongue, and stepped over to the shelves to get a calming draught. She handed it over and sighed. "Here, Alan. A calming draught."

Alan drank it without complaint, feeling his thoughts slow and his muscles loosen. His stomach stopped cramping and his face relaxed. Alan quickly rubbed his hands over his face, and mumbled something about a mirror. Pomfrey snorted, and pointed him to the bathroom. Alan stood and went quickly, looking up at the mirror with a sigh. His right eye was very red, but fortunately most people would think it was because he'd fallen asleep with his hands pressed against his face – which must have been what it looked like. The potion had also left his mind feeling more together, and the barricade he'd erected was slowly integrating back into his Occlumency shields as a solid wall over the small gap Voldemort had found that led clean through the idle thoughts he allowed for perusal and shunted into the back of his mind where he kept his secrets. He wasn't trying for subtlety there. He did not want Voldemort in his mind, much less past his shields. Alan felt momentarily scared. Voldemort would know he had more to his mind than the front he had seen in the Graveyard. He wouldn't be fooled again.

Madam Pomfrey knocked on the door. "Alan, don't tell me you fainted in there."

Alan smiled. Madam Pomfrey had enjoyed teaching their group several healing spells; it had assuaged her feelings of uselessness with Umbridge controlling the students so cruelly. He stepped out and smiled weakly at her.

"No, I didn't faint. Just thinking." Alan looked around, but there were no curtained beds. "Isn't McGonagall here?"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. "No, she was transferred to St. Mungos. Four stunners to the chest, at her age ... She could easily have died. She's there for the time being. Why, Alan?"

Alan bit his lip. "Nothing." He sourly growled. Madam Pomfrey didn't press, and Alan turned, thanked her, and left. She watched him go with a face full of worry, but Alan had nothing to say to relax her.

Stalking through the mildly crowded corridors, Alan growled under his breath. Severus, Geoffrey, and McGonagall were gone. Dumbledore was gone. Hell, Hagrid was gone. There were no Order members in the school anymore, and he would have to waste time trying to find someone on his mirror. Alan turned down a secret passage and started running. It was only a few hours after noon. He'd have to get everyone together before evening if he wanted any help for himself.

Bursting out by the dorms, Alan stalked down and gave the password, storming through the common room in such a blatant mood that nobody challenged him. He dropped into his dormitory, grateful for it being empty and uncaring that his friends were going to panic for several minutes trying to find him, and pulled out his mirror.

"Severus."

Nothing.

"Geoffrey. Ginger." Neither one. "Green." Unsurprising. He didn't take his mirror into experiments, and that took up half his time. However, Alan wasn't feeling very charitable, and he growled out, "Andrew."

Nothing. That worried him. Andrew always had his mirror. "Andrew!" Alan cried out in frustration, and then shouted, "Lyall!"

The dark blonde woman yelped and snatched up her mirror. "Alan! What are you doing yelling at me?"

"Sorry. Nobody's answering their mirrors." Lyall always knew where someone was if they'd mentioned it to anyone. She was an excellent coordinator.

Lyall blinked. "You need somebody?" Alan merely nodded. "Oh dear. I know that Geoffrey and Severus are doing something at the Ministry, Green's in an experiment and all. What are you needing?"

Alan couldn't make heads or tails of that. How could Voldemort get into the ministry if all his family was there? "What? How can they be at the ministry?"

Lyall bit her lip, and then yelped. "Oh! They're probably at the Embassy. It's for dealing with foreigners, because there's still that issue about Regulus going missing and then Velorian offing some pureblood yesterday that they're trying to keep quiet."

"Wait, what?" Alan gasped. "Velorian killed someone?"

"Oh, you hadn't heard? Lucius Malfoy. Apparently he killed him when he brought the Lestranges in for the little 'talk' they'd planned. The lady said something wrong and Velorian picked a fight, killing both men and Lucius, and wounding her badly. Koreol came in, though, and she Avada'd Andrew. Velorian panicked and she got away." Lyall hurried to continue. "Andrew's doing fine, he's just weak and feeling sick. He'll be picking himself up for a week or so before he'll be back to his normal antics, but either way there's a load of Aurors and probably your father and uncle with Ginger watching that in the Embassy, somewhere apart from the regular Ministry." She snorted. "The Ministry's probably quiet for once in a blue moon."

Alan was feeling cold. He quietly thanked Lyall and cut the line before he breathed carefully through his nose. He was almost certain

Voldemort had planned this, somehow. He must have set off Velorian on purpose by sending the Lestranges. So many others could have gone, namely someone less important, and he chooses the half-insane woman and her husband and brother-in-law. He hoped their deaths hit him hard. However, it ensured everyone was out of the Ministry quickly, and ensured there'd be an argument way into the night. Geoffrey and Ginger and Severus would be there the entire time, and probably when it finished everyone would just go home, leaving the Ministry open and vulnerable -

And Alan friendless. Or so they would think. Fruitlessly, Alan tried to call Lily, but he supposed she would be with her husband dealing with Velorian's little mess, as would Sirius, Frank, and Alice. Lupin was probably out ...

"Ginger!" Alan shouted. Grimmauld Place would not be empty and Ginger would have left her mirror for her children. At least he could leave a message for reinforcements. "Ginger, one of your kids better pick up your mirror, dammitall! Ginger!"

"Okay, okay, what are you yelling for already!" Adam's face appeared in the mirror and he grimaced. "Alan, what are you yelling about?"

"Adam, are there any adults there currently?"

Adam frowned and shook his head. "Ms. Vance was watching us, but one of her friends told her she had to come hear this long-winded argument going on in some place called the Embassy – apparently it's not happening often – and she believed Sean what he told her we'd be fine. So now I'm having to run all over the place trying to keep them in line because I don't know how to find nobody and can't bring anybody in."

Alan wondered how much trouble Emmeline would be in with Ginger. Oh, he did not want to witness that argument. "Alright, Adam?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry to put more on your shoulders, but you have to write this message down and give it to the first adult to show back up there, tell

them it has to get to Dumbledore or one of the Aurors or Lupin right away, alright?"

"Sure!" Adam nodded enthusiastically and carried the mirror over to the desk, where he picked up one of Geoffrey's pens and pulled over the notepad. "Shoot."

Alan took a deep breath and considered his options. "Voldemort is in the Department of Mysteries."

Adam repeated it, and then paused. "Alan, how do you spell 'Voldemort'?"

Alan chuckled. How many kids asked that? Most of the people here flinched at the sound of his name. Alan quickly spelled it for him, and waited as he finished that line, thinking up the rest. "And Adam?" Alan quickly clarified. "Don't panic, all right? I'm doing something about this, but to continue, 'He has asked for the locket in exchange for Regulus Black.'"

"No!" Adam cried.

"Adam, it's being taken care of. You have to get this to someone so they can do more, alright?" Alan scolded. Adam subsided slowly and continued writing, nodding as he finished. "I, Alan, am going after him with a fake locket, leaving at about six. I'd appreciate some backup, please."

Adam snickered. "You want it written like that?"

"Sure." Alan shrugged. Adam finished, and then read it back,

"Voldemort is in the Department of Mysteries. He has asked for the locket in exchange for Regulus Black. I, Alan, am going after him with a fake locket, leaving at about six. I'd appreciate some backup, please." Adam looked back through. "What's in the Department of Mysteries?"

Alan rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Stuff I really don't care about right now. All that matters is that it's got Regulus."

"You'll get him out of there?"

Alan looked up and found Adam staring through the mirror at him, wide-eyed. Alan smiled weakly for him. "Yeah, I'm getting him out."

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Alan thanked everything he knew that Crookshanks liked him. He'd have never found the cat flap into Gryffindor otherwise. He slipped inside pretty easily, and then just trotted across the common room. He hadn't expected anyone to pick him up, but a black-haired girl happily scooped him off the floor.

"Ginny, Arachne is so cute you know."

Alan cursed Blaise for getting that dark little kneazle cross for Ginny. He had to pick one that resembled his animagus form. Ginny plucked him from the girl's arms and sighed. She then held him out and frowned. "This isn't Arachne, Romilda. She's too dark, and it's male too." Alan was very glad cats could not blush, because the head rush was making him dizzy. Irritably, he struggled out of Ginny's arms, and then ran up the stairs, hearing a bunch of questions flowing behind him. He almost ran into Neville, who reached down to catch him again.

"Arachne, you get everywhere." Neville sighed quietly. Alan heard no one in the stairs, and struggled to get down, but Neville held on quite well. "Stop fighting, girl." He shifted his hold and carried him down the stairs, securely tucked in his arms. Alan fumed. Neville was wasting his time! "Ginny, Arachne was getting into our dorm again. Keep your pretty kitty in line, will you?"

"Neville, oh. That's not Arachne. That's someone else's cat. He isn't smooth like her, and male too. I think it's a full kneazle, look at his tail."

Neville blinked, and abruptly looked down at the cat. Alan glared back, growling in the back of his throat and lashing his tail. Neville's eyebrows shot up, and he nodded. "Oh, okay. Maybe he's a

Slytherin's, then because I was sure I recognized him." Alan calmed immediately, hoping Neville got the picture. As the common room rumbled over the comment, Neville turned around and slipped back upstairs, sitting on his bed and letting Alan go with a sigh. Alan scampered away and looked around, but there was no one in the dorm. Neville sighed.

"Harry's out with your Slytherins, looking for you. What were you needing that you came up here, Alan?"

Alan changed back and frowned. "I needed to talk to Harry, but I suppose you can look too. Can you contact your parents or his with your mirrors? I've only got Lily on mine."

Neville frowned, but pulled the mirror out of his bedside table and listing the names of the Marauders. No one answered, not even Lupin. Neville looked up and shook his head. "Why did you need them? What happened, anyways? You fell out of your chair pretty heavily, and you looked sick. Harry said your eyes were inflamed." Neville was frowning firmly. "Although I don't believe I've had that particular explained yet."

Alan frowned. "I don't suppose that's gotten very far, has it?"

"Has what?" Neville frowned. His tone was dangerous. Alan smiled thinly.

"There was a prophecy made, fifteen years ago." Alan explained. "One boy would destroy the Dark Lord." Neville had gone very still. "You know it?"

"Of it." Neville answered quietly. "It was either me, or Harry. I can't remember why."

"Child born at the end of July, to parents who have thrice defied him." Alan said quietly. "My birthday was sometime after midnight, Aug 1st. My mother had refused the advances of a man named Tom Riddle, three times. My father won't speak of his part in it. Voldemort attacked my mother and I. He killed her when she defended me. He then attacked me. His spell hit my right eye. I should be blind, but my

magic compensates. It's how I knew you were reading the Occlumency book, because I could 'see' you had it magicked and could make an educated guess."

"It's how you knew Jonas' spell failed on several of us, I presume?" Neville queried. He looked pale. Alan merely nodded, and then sighed.

"Either way, there's a connection between me and Voldemort. I got that vision Christmas when I saw Mr. Weasley get attacked." Neville nodded, looking like he was putting a number of pieces together. "I got another during History of Magic." Alan quietly answered. "Voldemort has Regulus. He wants me to come to the Department of Mysteries with the locket, to trade it for Regulus' life."

"So you're looking for someone to tell." Neville asked. Alan shook his head.

"With your attempt, there's nobody within contact. I've tried everybody, but Lyall told me they're all at some Embassy."

"They only use that for the big crimes by foreigner's. Did Geoffrey do something?" Neville asked.

"No, Velorian did." Alan watched Neville carefully. "He was with Lucius, you remember, and trying to find out about the Death Eaters. Apparently Lucius wanted him to meet a few others during the recruiting, and ... the Death Eaters he brought were the Lestranges." Neville stiffened immediately, and Alan looked down at his hand. "Something went wrong; I suspect one of them said something and Velorian lost it. He killed Lucius and the Lestrange brothers and seriously injured Bellatrix, but she got away when Koreol and Andrew arrived in concern for Velorian – Koreol knows what's going on with him all the time. Bellatrix A. Andrew – he's not dead, just weak, because he's a vampire – and then she got away. The Aurors have Velorian in custody for killing Lucius, but he's both willing to take veritaserum and has a lot of friends in the Aurors. He'll be fine, they just have to hear him out. With the current politics, it could take days."

Neville nodded slowly, and then gave Alan a cautious look. "You're going after him yourself, aren't you? And you want help."

Alan watched Neville and then nodded slowly. He was hoping Neville would agree. He was the strongest student after him and Harry, and with him and Blaise going along, they'd be at a much better advantage than they would otherwise. Besides, Harry had that excellent cloak.

Neville sighed, and then walked to Harry's trunk, quickly unlocking it and fishing out the cloak and the revised Map. "We'll want to get the twins to cover our absence. If you can, I'd get Ginny, Nanna and Melanie to work some interference as well, maybe including Dillan and Jonas."

"I think the twins and Jonas would do perfectly find on their own." Alan drawled. "You remember the mess Jonas made several weeks ago."

"Was it all just to get at the Inquisitorial Squad?" Neville asked quietly.

"Yes. Do you have any idea how many detentions he's gotten? Mind, he's earned them all over the years, but he's fucking pissed off about it. I suspect that's why Umbridge hasn't been killed, because he earned them and even his parents agree, but if they saw the damage, well ..." Alan shrugged. "I suspect Umbridge won't be around when September comes."

Neville smiled surprisingly warmly. "I'll have to tell my parents to send a thank you card when it happens."

Alan snorted.

Neville quickly consulted the map and nodded. "Yours are going downstairs; Harry's coming back this way. Is Blaise likely to have his mirror on him?"

"We always do. Draco's searched our dorm several times but he can't seem to figure out the fake bottom to my trunk, so we haven't lost

anything. But since we need the mirrors all the time, we keep them on ourselves. May I use yours? I don't have a connection to Blaise."

Neville nodded, and pulled out a second mirror, handing it over. Alan smirked. "You know, if you spell the mirrors together they can merge, so you only need to use one mirror to get to all your contacts."

"What about others calling in on another mirror?"

"You get beeped at, and the corners go black. I'll talk you through it later. It's a spell Velorian taught me." Alan addressed the mirror, "Blaise you ninny hammer. Pick up your mirror."

Swearing came through, and then Blaise's face showed up. "Alan, what are you doing and where are you?"

"Guess." Alan said dryly. "I'm using Neville's mirror. I'm in the Gryffindor dorms."

Blaise looked tongue-tied for several minutes and then took a long, deep breath. "Okay, we'll skip the how you got in there and go straight to the what the Hell happened?"

Alan sighed. "I got another vision. Voldemort has Regulus in the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry. I can't find anyone, so I'm going after it. I left a message at Grimmauld telling them."

Blaise gaped and then sighed and rubbed his temples. "This is just freaking scary, Alan, how you and trouble get together and make babies." Alan raised his eyebrow at the phrase and Blaise flushed. "Where do you want me, Alan?"

Alan smiled; he admired Blaise's loyalty. He would only ever tease him about it if he had a good escape plan and didn't need a big favour, though. "I need you to come with me, but drop by Luna on your way up to let her know where we're going. I don't want her worrying. And drop a note by Jonas, too, that I need him to create some chaos with the twins – Wait. Don't tell him. We'll incite the twins into getting him if they can and ask only if he doesn't reciprocate."

Blaise nodded seriously – Neville was fighting down snickers as he watched Harry's progress. Alan looked over at the map, "Can you find Luna?"

"She's under a tree outside, over by the Whomping Willow." Neville answered. "You do realize Ginny is unlikely to just stay here and run interference, especially if her boyfriend is going?"

Alan shrugged. "We can take her if she insists, but I don't want too many people going. Where are the twins?"

"Just coming into the common room. Want me to snag them in the hall?"

"Yes. Get them to pass the word to everyone, we need to leave."

Neville stood and stuck head immediately out the door and hollered, "Fred! George! I got a question for you!"

The twins thundered up the stairs and Alan heard them immediately start talking in low whispers. Alan didn't bother trying to follow, as he relayed Luna's location to Blaise, and then picked up the map. Umbridge was stalking a Care of Magical Creatures class with Professor Grubbly-Plank, and Severus and Geoffrey's offices, quarters, and classrooms were empty. Jonas, interestingly enough, was walking over to where Luna and Blaise were just re-entering the castle. Alan wasn't sure whether to be worried or amused. Either way...

Neville came back in, and Alan watched Harry trot into the Common Room and get waylaid by Ginny. Neville sighed and looked back over at him.

"Well?"

Alan handed him the map. "Can't walk through your common room in these clothes." He indicated his silver sheen shirt, black pants and green and silver school tie. His pants were even pressed – he was going to kill Blaise for talking to the house elves about his wardrobe. But he looked every inch the Slytherin prince.

Neville snorted. "No, I'd say not."

Alan transformed into the small dark kneazle, and then jumped and clambered up Neville's robes to his shoulders. He'd determined from Blaise that the robes were thick enough that he could climb them without clawing someone. As Neville didn't complain, Alan sat up as steadily as he could and yowled. Neville laughed quietly and walked down the stairs, careful of Alan's balance. The stairs were a challenge, but he stayed on and mewled again when he saw Harry, leaping off Neville's shoulders and clambering up Harry's as well. He loved being able to do that. Harry laughed, and scratched his ears, opening his mouth to ask, and then closing it as Alan dug his claws in. Harry smiled wryly.

"How did you get up here, eh? Neville, how did Lucille's cat make it into the Gryffindor dorms?"

Alan almost coughed. Lucille's pet?

Neville kept a straight face as he answered, "No idea, but he's apparently got some kind of hairball to deal with. She'd probably appreciate getting him back."

Harry nodded as though it made perfect sense, even though Alan knew that they both knew Lucille had no familiar. Ginny's curious expression told him she knew it as well. She was probably going to follow them. It was fine, though. The Weasley girl was clever, resourceful, and he was fairly sure she had a small cache of Mimi's Fever Dream because Blaise had reported her asking for the Jabberwocky venom. Alan tugged on Harry's robe, and then nodded at Ginny, then up the stairs. Harry frowned, clearly not getting it, and Alan glanced between them and leaped off, hoping like Hell he could get up the stairs without setting off the alarms.

"Hey, get back here! Ginny, would you?"

"I got it."

Alan made it up the stairs and wondered where to find Ginny's room. She was fourth year ... He ducked into the fourth floor, and looked around, sniffing slightly. She did have a distinct smell ... something like the twins, so...

Alan jumped onto the bed at the far wall and looked around. Ginny came in and huffed. "Alright kitty, whatever you are—"

Alan glanced at her, and changed back. Ginny squeaked. There was no one else in there, so Alan felt safe and he just grinned. "Thought I'd find some way to talk you into bringing your Mimi's with you." Alan said. "We're going to be leaving, and since Neville is quite convinced you won't stay here, it'd be best. If you will stay, we could certainly use them either way."

Ginny blinked several times, and then huffed. "You will explain." She stated, and then dug into her trunk, pulling out a small bag that clinked as she pocketed it. Alan changed back, and Ginny picked him up and then blushed. "Oh ... sorry about earlier." She murmured. Alan wished she hadn't reminded him of it.

Rejoining the two boys, Neville opened the portrait and led the way out, moving into the corridors before he glanced down at the Map, and then at Ginny. Irritably, Ginny huffed. "I know its Alan. He showed himself because he wanted me to fetch my Mimi's for when I joined you guys on whatever you're doing this time around."

Neville paused, and then looked down at Alan. "You know, he was surprisingly calm when he informed me of ... the problem."

Alan snorted, and looked up at him with what he hoped was disdain. Harry looked between them, and shrugged. "If you remember, Neville, he left the exam looking like he got run over by a hippogriff. Pomfrey probably gave him a calming draught."

Alan nodded sharply and then stared at the Map, before he looked around the corridors and squirmed out of Ginny's arms. Once down, he changed back.

"Yeah, she gave me one. Harry, Voldemort has Regulus. He wants me to meet him in the Department of Mysteries with the locket in exchange for his life."

Harry stared wide-eyed at him for a long moment, and then coughed. "That's one Hell of a calming draught."

Alan snorted and moved between Harry and Neville, looking down at the Map. "Blaise is waiting in the passage by the entrance hall, with Luna." Alan huffed. He did not want Luna coming along, but he suspected he would have as much luck talking her out of it as Blaise would have with Ginny. "Right. Let's go – wait." Alan traced a name running up the hidden stairwell, and quickly pulled aside the curtain. Salvador stumbled out, and fell against Alan. He startled, tried to pull away, and Alan quickly growled, "Salvador, cut it out. What's with you?"

Salvador blinked, and stopped, but his body was rigid with tension. "I'm fucked, Alan. I've got detention again. I'm not doing it; I'm leaving once I can get out of the god-be-damned school. I won't be tortured, alright?"

Alan paused to think quickly, and then sighed. "I'm out of the school for the time being anyways; come with us. Harry, can he use your cloak?" Salvador was a year older, quick, and intelligent. He would not turn him down as more backup. He was remarkably out of sorts that he was freaking out like this. And what on earth was he doing, going upstairs?

Harry nodded, moved to speak, and smiled wryly when Neville handed it over. "Gee, divvy out my stuff without even asking, why don't you."

Neville merely nodded and Salvador hesitated before wrapping the cloak around himself and disappearing. Alan asked of the empty space, "How's Lucille? She avoiding detentions?"

"Er, yeah, and she's pissed off at me at the moment. It was half-responsible for the detention I've got."

"How'd you piss Lucille off?" Harry asked.

"I'd rather not say." Salvador hedged. "Suffice to say, I'm in the doghouse."

Harry, Alan and Neville traded looks and sighed. They kept walking, not adding more to the conversation as the amount of students around them thickened. Harry looked over his shoulder, and Alan presumed that Salvador had moved in between their staggered group in order to avoid the students moving down to dinner; it frustrated him that he couldn't see Harry's cloak. They got a few looks, but nobody lingered. While it was still surprising to them that Alan and Harry were friends, it wasn't commented upon. However ...

"Prince, haven't you learned yet?" Draco sneered. He stalked over and, completely ignoring Harry, Neville and Ginny, grabbed Alan's collar. It wasn't the most successful move; Alan was at least two inches taller than Draco, and perfectly capable of glaring down his nose at the tow-headed ferret.

"No, apparently I haven't." Alan easily answered, smiling thinly. "And you know what? I doubt it'll matter if I ever learn." Alan tilted his head, and wondered why Draco was being so belligerent. He couldn't ... could he be that cruel?

"I know you must be at least mildly interested, but honestly. Neville's got to be a better whore than Harry, but just because you're desperate doesn't mean you need to keep at it. Once should be enough, from what Lavender says."

Alan's reservations disappeared, and he quickly held up his hand to stop Harry and Neville. He gave them a firm glare and turned back to Draco with a cocky grin.

"Maybe you should stop concerning yourself with my life and check up on your own. I think you may have a few more concerns once the Ministry decides they're actually going to admit to their mistakes than I will."

Draco snarled. "You're the one who's in for it, Alan. When my father –"
"

Alan burst into derisive laughter; he couldn't help it. "Oh Draco, go and update your threats already. I never thought you'd be so behind on the news. Just give it up; it's getting sad and I'm going to start feeling sorry for you." Alan crooked his finger at Harry, and Harry obediently cast a quick stunner. Draco's eyes, which had just become confused, rolled into the back of his head as he fell, Alan neatly stepping out of the way. Alan nodded at them, and then jerked his head towards the door. Several students were running out through the halls, and Alan quickly spoke, "Run."

They left the front doors easily, Blaise and Luna joining them as they moved quickly across the grounds. Blaise caught up with Alan, "Why are you running?"

"Stunned Draco to get out, the little shit."

"Isn't that a bit stupid?"

"His father's dead, with two Lestranges in his house and Velorian likely taking Veritaserum. The whole game's humped. Besides, if everything plays out like I suspect," Alan took a deep breath. "The Ministry's going to have a lot more proof of the Dark Lord than they'll ever want."

Blaise eyed him carefully, but they were close to the forest, and most of their group was getting tired. As they stopped, Salvador tripped over the cloak and fell, crying out sharply. Alan stepped back to help him up, but when he accidentally brushed his back, Salvador flinched away with a hiss. Alan blinked, and pulled the cloak off. Several portions of Salvador's robes were tacky, sticking to his shirt. Alan's brow furrowed. "Salvador ..."

"Alan, back off." Salvador stiffly stood, and stepped back, glaring. "I'm coming with you to get away from the school. That's it. I'm not asking for your help."

Alan frowned, and then nodded curtly. "Fine. Although I have to wonder what you were doing, going upstairs." He turned and led the way again, lobbing the invisibility cloak at Neville who caught it easily, and gave it to Harry to put away, shrunken, in his pocket. Alan fixed Salvador with a raised eyebrow.

Salvador growled softly. "I was being tailed by Filch, and that was the only passage I found to duck into and lose him with. Trust me, I'd tried all the others."

Alan nodded shortly and walked past him, leading the way into the forest until he was confident they were out of sight. The others looked over at him with curious looks. Alan sighed.

"Sorry, I'm not even sure why we're out here other than that it's out of the sight of the school."

"Do you even know where the Ministry is?" Blaise sneered.

"Sorta." Alan offered. "I went there once. That's what Harry and Neville are for."

Harry and Neville glanced at each other warily. "We're usually apparating in with our parents." Harry offered. "I think that's a little out of our range. You know how to make a portkey?"

Alan blinked, and then swore. He'd forgotten the goddamn necklace! Quickly, Alan conjured a replica; he'd heard Regulus describe it often enough to know what it looked like, and what it was made of. To it he added a ring, simple, girly, with a generic magic signature - classic auror work. According to Regulus, his conjuration should last at least two days; since he only needed several hours, it should be fine. After a moment, Alan added the unidentifiable spell to the locket, hoping to disguise that it was a conjured fake by making it seem to have an unknown, indecipherable spell cloaking it. After a minute, Harry asked again.

"Was that a yes, or a no?"

“Sorry.” Alan ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, undoing the clasp and placing the necklace around his throat. “No, I don’t know how. I just needed to make the locket.”

Harry chuckled quietly, and shook his head. “So we have no clue how we’re getting there?”

“Brooms might work.” Salvador offered. “But I don’t know how long it might take.”

Alan sighed again. “But how would we find our way there?” Salvador shrugged. Silence reigned for several minutes, and Alan began to fidget in frustration. This was beginning to feel like a really bad idea, but what else could they do? Something rumbled farther into the forest, and everyone stared, startled. A snake darted out of the underbrush, hissing furiously. Alan paused to listen,

“Stupid huge man-thing, scaring everything off, destroying and damaging and waking everything up, bringing hooves down upon us, and driving food from their homes-“ It slithered into the other bush, but Harry’s face was a bit of a study. Alan raised his eyebrow, and Harry huffed.

“I can’t really say.”

Alan focused on him, and hissed, “Tell me.”

“Hagrid brought his half-brother back with him when Dumbledore sent him to the giants.” Harry answered easily, his sibilant vowels in parseltongue familiar as Alan’s own voice. “Apparently he’s making a ruckus in the forest.”

Alan rubbed his forehead, commenting quietly, “Hagrid is an idiot.”

That Harry didn’t argue spoke volumes.

Alan ran his hand down his neck, and jumped when Luna reached up and pulled his head down. He didn’t have time to react before she kissed him. Alan couldn’t bring himself to argue, but he sighed when she let him go.

"Luna, we don't really have time for this."

"Of course we do. Luck comes when you least expect it. When you stopped looking for it, it came. Look around."

Alan looked up, and almost stopped breathing. Behind Salvador was a thestral staring gloomily at Alan before stretching forward. Alan didn't think he needed it spooked, so he quickly spoke, "Salvador, you're going to be licked."

Salvador blinked, and then stiffened as the thestral licked his shirt. He bit his lip and fisted his hands quickly. Neville was staring as well, but the rest of them looked confused. As soon as the pressure stopped, Salvador stepped out of reach and stared at the right spot, but with a stiffness that made Alan suspect he couldn't see them. Alan had to admit that had to be eerie.

"Oh, Salvador. You brought another one." Luna happily sang. "We need five more, I think."

As Alan saw another approach, he moved forward quickly and grabbed Salvador's shoulder. He let his eyes firm until he was confident Salvador would obey him. "You're bleeding enough to attract carrion eaters. Take off your shirt and let me heal it."

Salvador opened and closed his mouth, and then turned and pulled his shirt up bit by bit, the fabric sticking to the congealed blood. Alan gently deflected the nearest threstral's muzzle, and eyed the wounds. He felt sick just looking at them. It was actually less than he'd expected; Salvador had apparently just bled for a while, rather than a lot, but the bruising was still dark, split skin over deep purple bruises – it looked black under his already dark brown skin. Recalling the spells Pomfrey had taught them, and physiology he'd first learned from Green, Alan gently tapped Salvador's shoulders, murmuring the words and watching the magic make Salvador's skin warp to his eyes. As the haze passed down, the bruising lightened and disappeared beneath his colouring, and the blood caked and scabbed, curling on the edges in several long stripes across his shoulders and lower back, some extraneous blood slowly flaking off. Salvador hissed.

"That itches like a sonuvabitch, Alan."

"It's healing, Salvador. It's less sore, right?"

"I'm just itchy, is all. That spell's damn good. Which one was it?"

"The one for a week's healing. I'm doing the next as well, for that itching problem." Alan brought it to mind, and practiced his silent casting – admittedly mostly because the pronunciation escaped him. The scabs disappeared into Salvador's back, leaving behind off-white scars. Alan frowned; it shouldn't have scarred. He huffed, though, and let it be. He couldn't be perfect. "I suppose that's the best it'll get. You're still a little bruised, though, and that dried blood ..."

Alan was about to cast a scouring charm, when the nearest thestral darted in again and licked the dried blood away. Alan watched it warily, and rested a hand on its muzzle. Thestrals would bite if they were particularly hungry, or something smelled like food to them. Salvador had been quite bloody; that tended to strike them as 'food'.

"Salvador ... are you attached to that shirt?" Alan asked quietly.

"Not anymore, no." Salvador held it up, and it hung damply.

"Good. Offer it to the thestrals, please. We need to get you to not smell like food, or one of them is going to try taking a bite and find out that you technically are."

Salvador didn't need telling twice. He turned and lifted to bloody shirt close enough to the one that had been licking his back, and then turned his other arm around and used the cleaning charm on himself, getting the dried blood off his back, the scars pale and gleaming. Alan frowned again; he did not like those. He couldn't change them, and it bugged him. However, they had to get moving. Alan turned to look around, and sighed in satisfaction as he counted the thestrals: there were seven, one for each and as he watched, another came out of the forest. Alan quirked his lips,

"Looks like we have our ride. Neville, would you try for your parents again? I'm going to try for mine."

Neville nodded and pulled out his mirror, calling for the Marauders. Alan tried for his family again, but got no one. Ginger's mirror was immediately picked up by Adam who shook his head, his eyes dark with worry. Alan reassured him he was looking out for himself, and was taking several others who were just as strong as he was with him, letting the boy go with the admonition to give the message to the first adult he saw. When Alan looked up from it, Neville shook his head.

"Shit. Can anyone think of anything else they think I should try?" Alan looked around, and Luna breezily offered,

"Have you tried to find an adult?" Alan nodded. "Double-checked?" He nodded again, getting a little impatient. "We've covered our tracks so we won't get in trouble if it's all a hoax?" Alan swallowed, but thought about it and nodded carefully. "We have an escape plan?"

Alan thought about it a moment. "Are the thestrals likely to wait for us to come out?"

Luna nodded happily, and Harry also quietly agreed.

"Then yes, we can escape if we can get in and out. However, I'm willing to bet that since he 'invited' me, I'm going to be given an escort in."

"We'll follow behind you. You have the mirror between us?" Harry asked immediately. Alan raised his eyebrow and flashed the item in question. Harry stuck out his tongue and continued. "Then you might be able to use that. We'll have to think of several complex spells ... is there anything you can think of that would allow you to give the basic message of 'get your asses in here'?"

Neville grunted, and then quickly searched his pockets. Several eyes moved his way, and he finally came out with a quill. Quickly, he cast a transfiguration, making it into a long silver chain he swore at and spelled again. After a moment's observation, Neville duplicated it and handed one over to both Harry and Alan.

"Hermione was looking up the protean charm, and I remembered it just as you were saying that. When something happens to Alan's chain, on accident or purpose, it will happen to Harry's. It's a little weak because of all the magic I used on it besides the charm, but it should hold well enough for the evening."

Alan eyed the chain with respect, and then looked at Neville. "So if my chain breaks, Harry's will break?"

"And vice versa." Neville nodded.

"Good job, Neville." Salvador offered. "So, we going to go risk our lives for some as yet unknown –to me, at least – reason?"

Alan closed his eyes and nodded. "Voldemort has Regulus, my godfather. He wants me to bring him the locket in exchange for Regulus' life, and he wants me to come alone."

Salvador managed to pale quite impressively for being black. "Oh." He offered quietly. Alan looked calmly at him; Salvador had been disowned for being unwilling to follow Voldemort, as his family had wanted.

"You don't have to come, Salvador. You can just leave as you'd been planning before and no one here will think less of you. Since you're not bleeding, you've got a better chance than you had previously. You can even use one of these thestrals to get where you want to go."

Salvador looked like he was seriously considering it, and then he stopped and shook his head violently. "Lucille would kill me if I let you go without following. I've got my apparation license, too. I'll help, Alan. Count me in."

Alan smiled weakly, and then nodded at the gathered students. All of them following him, for something that could turn out to be a trap, something he wasn't as sure as he'd like to be wasn't a complete hoax. Regulus could be dead by now, or insane. Voldemort could just as easily take the locket from a corpse as from him alive, and if he

died, every one who followed him might easily die as well. It was, in all honesty, a stupid risk.

Alan looked from Harry's firm expression, to Neville's quiet resolve. Blaise and Ginny both were just looking stubborn; Salvador was scared but determined. Luna was simply peaceful, watching him with a small smile and half-lidded eyes. He tried to ask his question with his eyes, but she didn't look at all different. He had to figure this out on his own. Was it worth the risk? Even if Regulus was alive, he'd been missing for two months. Alan felt his throat dry out at the thought. He'd been tortured in the graveyard at the end of last year, a matter of an hour, maybe more; Regulus ...

His face twinged again. Alan closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Voldemort would be at the ministry, waiting. If he wasn't there personally someone was, and it was someone he trusted. Someone he valued. Someone it would hurt him to lose.

Could he kill someone like that? In cold blood?

Alan opened his eyes.

"Let's go."

A/N: Cliffhanger! Action! Adventure! Stupidity and Heroics! And of all things, this might even be on time. Hallelujah! Be happy, read, enjoy, and please review? The next few chapters will be Alan's POV, but that's not going to be permanent, so don't worry. He's just in the thick of things while Harry is not - natural reasons for an adjustment. So dearly thank you to you all!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-five

Mounting the thestrals was a bit of an adventure as to four of those present they were completely invisible. Salvador was less than pleased at the prospect, but Harry was rather enthused. Alan helped him onto a thestral, and then found that Luna was helping Ginny, and Neville had gotten a stubborn Blaise up. Alan turned to Salvador and raised his eyebrow. Salvador huffed.

“Fine. Where is one?” He crossed his arms over his bare chest; his robes back on after he’d scourgified the back where it had picked up some blood from his shirt. Alan walked over to another thestral and patted its neck, letting Salvador approach on his own. When he’d found it and worked his hands up to its back, Alan gave him a bit of a boost so he could fumble slightly into finding out where to hold on. After a moment of struggling, and looking rather panicked, Salvador closed his eyes and fisted his hands in the creature’s mane.

“Right, let me know when we’re starting, and when we’re down. I’m just not going to open my eyes again.”

Alan smirked. “You play Quidditch just fine.”

“I have a broom. I can see my broom.”

“Harry and Ginny are perfectly fine.” Alan jibed.

“They’re Gryffindors. They’re supposed to be enjoying this.”

Alan let Salvador go and pulled himself onto his own thestral, enjoying the silky coat beneath his hands. Luna had hopped onto hers sidesaddle, and Neville pulled himself up, fitting his legs behind its wings and gently running his hands through the mane. Everyone was looking at Alan, except for Salvador, relaxed against his thestral’s mane. Waiting for him to get them on their way. Alan huffed, and thought about what he needed to ask.

“Please take us to the Ministry of Magic in London. The ...” Alan looked at Harry.

"Visitor's entrance, I suppose." Harry offered. "Mum took me through there once. I think I remember how to get in."

"So do I." Blaise clarified.

They smiled at each other, and then Alan's thestral raised its head from the shirt on the ground, and then took a few steps forward. When it swept its wings out, Alan nearly lost his balance, and then it seemed to leap into the air. The change was so sudden, Alan yelped, and grabbed on, clutching his knees and fisting his hands in its mane just to stay on. Salvador swore; Harry whooped happily and Ginny shrieked. Alan could commiserate; it was fucking startling!

They crested the forest and moved into the sky, the sun bright and low on the horizon, though it was still hours from sunset. Alan was less than pleased with the timing, but as they kept moving, he didn't look up. The wind was beating at his face due to the unprecedented speed the thestrals maintained. He hadn't known they could move this fast. The slipstream was plucking at his grip and clothes, while the creature was hardly beating its wings at all. Behind him, the other thestrals were arrayed, following his as it led them onwards. The ground streamed below them, the countryside beautiful and green and moving onward at a rapid pace.

Time passed without much change, the sun moved down the sky an indeterminable portion, the land streaming beneath them over fields, forests, and houses. Alan only knew they'd been flying for a very long time when his face throbbed with pain again. Alan bit at his lip, and felt the shield he'd placed buckle. For a terrifying moment, he considered dropping it, letting Voldemort in, reassuring him he was coming and checking on his godfather ...

His body jolted abruptly, and Alan clutched tightly to his mount, his mind reacting and slamming the barrier back in place. No! He would never do that; never allow him in. He was almost there. Voldemort would wait, probably all night. He couldn't expect Alan to pull off the impossible with any sort of finesse, not as a student. He would wait ... someone behind him shrieked, and Alan, hearing it stop, presumed they had just been startled as he had been at the tilt down.

The change hurtled them towards the blessedly deserted pavement; the street came up below them, and Alan sighed, bracing himself as the thestral landed surprisingly softly, coming down like it had just floated in the air. Alan looked around cautiously, drawing his wand and studying the surroundings, unwilling to get down until he felt safe ... they did not need to be ambushed, although such an act would admittedly be difficult in daylight.

The others landed around him, and, seeing his intensity, looked cautiously around as well but there was nothing there, and nobody to see. Alan finally licked his lips, and breathed carefully.

"I ... nobody's seeing anyone?" Alan hesitantly asked. He didn't like this one bit. There was a general negative murmur, and Alan finally, cautiously slipped off his thestral, walking over towards the only thing that really stood out in the street: a vandalized phone booth. He doubted there was anything special about the dumpster, really, despite the thestrals interest in it. The others followed him down, and Blaise immediately trotted up beside him.

"The phone booth is the way in."

"How do they work?" Alan asked quietly.

Blaise eyed him. "You're not going in alone, Alan."

"No, but I need to go down alone. If they stationed anyone in the atrium, I have to go alone, Blaise. I know a heating spell; if Harry's necklace warms, someone was down there. I'll call on the mirror if there's no one. How do I go down?"

"And how will we help you if we're stuck up here?" Blaise hissed.

Alan glared at him in return. "I'll let the necklace cool down when I'm out of the atrium; I'll make it very cold if there's others left in the atrium I could see. You can come down then, and follow after me. Do you guys know where the Department of Mysteries is?"

"Yes." Neville answered immediately. "I've never been inside, though. I'm blind as to how to get around." Harry nodded carefully as well.

Alan closed his eyes. It couldn't be helped. "Then you'll have to blunder around. Go down and wait in the hall after the necklace has cooled. When I want you to try and get in -which I'll do if I either see Voldemort or start feeling lost, so stop whining- I'll make the necklace heat again. If I'm in danger, I'll break it, and you charge, all right? Please, unless you can think of something better."

Salvador and Blaise both muttered irritably under their breath, but they acquiesced. Alan nodded sternly, and turned back to Blaise expectantly.

"You have to go in and dial six two four four two on the phone. The lady will ask you your name and your purpose; you get a badge, and then it takes you down into the atrium. And then you'll either call us down, or you'll be in deep shit, so I'm not talking you further through it, got it?" Blaise glared, and Alan nodded weakly. He looked around at his companions, trying to find a bit of the calm he'd had before, and then stepped into the phone booth, punching in the numbers quickly and waiting. A cool, female voice announced, "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

Alan shifted awkwardly. "Alan Prince ... risking my life." He offered.

"Thank you." The cool voice replied. "Please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes."

A small badge slid out of the slot where change was usually sent, and Alan pulled it out, curious. It read, 'Alan Prince, Mortally Adventurous'

Alan couldn't help but snort. Cute.

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the atrium."

Alan wondered if anyone would be there. He'd forgotten the contingency of potentially getting arrested. He'd just have to come up with something in that case. They were supposed to be more understanding than Death Eaters...

The floor of the phone booth shuddered, and Alan glanced around in mild panic as it descended below the pavement. As it grew pitch dark, Alan closed his eyes for a moment, and opened them again when his lids turned red. The light widened up from around his ankles to pour through as the booth descended into the middle of a deserted atrium. The light was fairly dim, and there were gilded fireplaces set in each of the dark walls. Straight ahead was a large golden fountain of a witch, a wizard, a centaur, a goblin and a house elf, all looking mildly ridiculous as the water poured from various orifices. The booth stopped, and the door opened; Alan shrunk back in the booth, and glanced around. As expected, several smudges of air were arrayed around the room, tucked between fireplaces, and he suspected at least two more were near the far walls. All together, there were at least six Death Eaters.

Quickly, Alan heated his necklace, eying the room. He wasn't sure he wanted his friends to go against them. Finally, however, Alan determined they could outwait him, and he stepped cautiously from the booth, his wand half out of its holster on his arm. The two Death Eaters nearest stalked closer and rid themselves of their invisibility. Alan reacted as though he hadn't known they were there but had expected a sudden appearance: he stiffened and drew his wand clearly, tracking between the two and backing up slowly. On his left, the Death Eater laughed.

"I'm so glad you came, Alan Prince. We've been waiting."

Alan grasped the locket in his left hand, and forced himself to stop backing up. "Where's my Godfather?" He asked steadily, glaring at the one who'd spoken and watching the other out of the corner of his eye.

"Let me have the locket, first, and hand over your wand, please. Let's be friendly, shall we?"

Alan merely raised his eyebrow, working the ring between his fingers and gently emphasizing it. "I don't need a wand to activate this. If you're as good as your word, I won't cast a single spell – I won't need to. What's the point in taking my wand?" Alan slipped the wood back

into its holster and smiled most reasonably at the Death Eater. Chuckles came from around them, and the Death Eater bowed shallowly.

"I suppose you are right. If you would follow me, then?"

His back itching, Alan followed, looking nervously around the room without having to fake it. He'd never been here before, after all. Curiosity won out, but he wouldn't remember much of the room after they'd left; he was too damn scared. He watched most of the smears detach and begin to follow them; it seemed that there'd be less Death Eaters to meet his friends than he'd expected. Good. An even fight wasn't on his mind right then. Alan wondered if any of his friends could kill. Would they leave with more people seeing thestrals than they'd arrived with?

His distraction cost him. The man behind him grabbed his right arm right around the wrist, and twisted it behind his back. Alan gasped, and then felt a wand press into his throat. Alan feared his bluff would fail then and there, but the first man made a quick noise, and the pressure halted, the grip maintained almost painfully. The first man smiled.

"So sorry, but we have to be careful. Relax the wand; you'll hurt the boy. He's not fighting. If you'll just come into the lift with us ..." He bowed shallowly again, indicating the open golden grill in front of them. Without much choice, Alan allowed the man to walk him in, and then stand at the back wall. The first man followed, one of the invisible men slipping in as well and standing near the front. The button labelled nine was pushed, and the lift lowered, rattling and clanging. Alan remained quietly in the man's grip on the trip down, waiting patiently for the lift to stop. He needed his wand to affect the necklace ... every minute without was another to wait for backup, unless the Order proved far more effective than he thought. Someone should be getting the message, surely ... God, Velorian. Couldn't he have waited to kill Lucius? It was a struggle to control his imminent panic.

The lift clanged to a stop, and the cool female voice announced, "Department of Mysteries" The invisible Death Eater and the first

stepped out almost simultaneously. The invisible sentry hurried down the hall, and the first did his mocking bow again. Alan tugged hard on the hand holding him and he was let go immediately. The choreography would be scarier if Alan hadn't seen the reason for it. They hadn't wanted him running into the invisible one, so they held him and once the reason was gone, they could laugh at him and pretend they thought he was just a child, oblivious to their prancing.

Alan took advantage of his freedom to rub his right hand on his throat, discretely moving his wand out and cooling the necklace to an uncomfortable temperature. He dropped his hand without lingering, and glared at the two men.

"Well?" He growled. "Get on with it."

The two Death Eaters looked at each other and moved down the hall, the first clearly expecting Alan to follow between them. It left him standing there in a staring contest with the second for several long moments, Alan purposefully playing for time. Finally, the first man looked back and huffed.

"Please, come along. We won't be hurting you."

Alan muttered, "Yet," under his breath, and sullenly stalked after the first man, leaving the other behind. Up ahead, Alan spotted a ward that he paused before crossing. Behind him, a loud clanging started up, disappearing behind the ward. Alan's heart raced; he hoped like Hell that wasn't his friends. However, neither Death Eater appeared worried about the lift; in fact, they urged him to keep walking, seemingly trying to prevent him from looking back. What, was he ruining the ambience or something by being uncooperative?

As he thought it, Alan realized that might be the case. When he'd seen Voldemort's welcome party in the Graveyard, it was at most twenty men, not counting the recent busts from Azkaban. Upstairs he'd had six of them – possibly one quarter of his most loyal unless he'd invited recruits and presuming everyone was here. It was a vague hope that he was bringing the men down, allowing Harry and the others free reign in the atrium, even if they'd lose precious time worrying about an attack that wasn't there. It was just as vague a

hope that he didn't have his full court here. Alan stopped dallying as he continued to walk towards the black door at the far end of the hall. This was getting more and more complicated.

Alan felt a bit like he was being escorted around some mockery of a ball, as the black door was held open for him once more. The invisible party had apparently already gone through and Alan couldn't find him as he looked around the black room. Unmarked black doors were set in the encircling wall, and the blue flames were the only colour. The two Death Eaters appeared to be conversing at the door as three smears streamed past them, gathering about behind him. Alan scanned the room, focusing on the doors all around, and he jumped when the door behind them shut. It didn't help when the walls began to rotate.

"Where are we?" Alan asked quietly. His voice shook slightly with nerves; this was so damn dangerous ...

"The Department of Mysteries, of course." The first Death Eater answered. He sounded very amused. Let him.

Alan watched the flames slow, and settle into position. There was no telling what door they had come in, or what door would lead to where they needed to go. None of the Death Eaters were worried, though, so Alan waited patiently. As expected, the first man took the lead.

"The Death Chamber." He announced. A door swung open, and he turned to smile at Alan, the smears moving out and through the open door into the dimly lit room beyond. There appeared to be a fire burning somewhere inside, as waves of golden light flickered. "Shall we?" The man asked.

Alan blinked, and then nodded shallowly, bile bitter in his mouth. Lying to himself would do nothing: he was so scared. Alan let his left hand clutch the locket again, and he walked carefully to the door and through.

Inside, it was an amphitheatre, stone risers leading down to a pit in the middle, a dais with a stone arch. Fires burned in each corner where the last riser rested, roaring in pillars reaching several feet into

the air. Along the top wall, there was a quick count of about eight Death Eaters, a few of which Alan suspected were those from above. If they'd just joined ranks, then maybe he was putting on a show. Maybe these were all his men, and it wouldn't be so hard ... as hard as it might be if he had more.

Then again, the others could be out doing more damage in another location. Alan prayed the locket was important enough that wasn't the case.

Alan returned his attention to the pit and his mouth dried. Regulus was standing next to the arch, swaying slightly in place but he looked clean and together. Alan regarded the man holding him carefully, taking in the two Death Eaters halfway up the stairs on either side, and then the pale form reclined negligently in a likely conjured, ornate throne-like chair.

Voldemort.

He was playing with something small and shiny, turning it over and over in his hands. Alan didn't know what it was, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know either.

He jumped when the door thumped shut behind him. Soft laughter rippled through the Death Eaters all along the walls, and Alan glanced at them under his brows. Behind him, one Death Eater placed himself against the door. The other, the first one to speak, grabbed Alan's arm.

"Come, please. Our Lord awaits."

Alan hoped he wasn't included in that 'our', but wasn't about to argue at the moment. Reluctantly, Alan allowed him to lead him down the steps to the floor. Once they were level, the Death Eater released Alan's arms and bowed deeply, kneeling and touching his forehead to the floor. Alan looked up stubbornly, staring defiantly at Voldemort. Nothing would make him debase himself like that. Looking shortly at Regulus, Alan's chest clenched: he looked completely unaware of his surroundings. Regret shot through him, and Alan startled again when Voldemort spoke.

"Thank you, my loyal. Stand back." He negligently waved a long, white hand at the stairs behind Alan, and then Voldemort sat up straight and smiled at his 'guest'. "Alan Prince, I am so very pleased you decided to join us this evening."

Alan smiled thinly. "I thank you for inviting me." He quipped back. A shiver ran down his back.

"It was my pleasure. I hope it wasn't too difficult for you to get away to meet me here. It is such a glorious place, one of the greatest of the Ministry: the Department of Mysteries. Do you realize the amount of information and lore that is stored and locked away here?" Voldemort offered. "The relics of the past, the powers deemed unfit, or dangerous. Take this veil." Voldemort patted the stone arch, and Alan saw that the black fabric hung within was a part of the arch, not another prop of Voldemort's. It rustled on its own as though stirred by a faint breeze, uncaring of people around it. The black fabric was moulded some, tattered, but Alan could hear a faint whispering, as though someone stood just on the other side. He was fairly confident there was no one there, but wouldn't put it past Voldemort. He felt a strong urge to rip the fabric aside and expose the trick, but something pressed against his chest and he stopped abruptly, looking down.

Voldemort was wearing a very fine pair of what Alan could only really call silk slippers, his foot presently pressed against Alan's chest, stopping him. He shivered; abruptly realizing he'd walked up to the dais and had been about to mount it when Voldemort stopped him. Alan looked up and met the red eyes, feeling cold. Voldemort smiled thinly, dragging his foot down Alan chest before placing it on the floor. Alan stubbornly did not flinch.

"A fascinating power, isn't it?" He murmured. "Entrancing to those who can hear the voices, who are unaware of the power it wields. People have passed through that veil; nothing has ever come out."

Alan felt another, stronger shiver. He did not like being that close to Voldemort or the veil, but wasn't sure if he should back up or not. Voldemort leaned forward, and Alan stepped quickly back two steps without thinking about it. Cold sweat ran down his back, and Alan felt

his arms tremble. He looked for Voldemort's wand and was almost surprised he didn't find it in his hands. He'd felt certain he was to be cursed, but there was no reason for it. Maybe it was a reaction from last year ...

Voldemort laughed quietly, smiling widely as he sat back in his chair. "I'm sorry." He offered, sounding like he meant nothing of the sort. "I didn't mean to scare you." He was watching Alan like he'd just done something interesting, and Alan didn't like it. He didn't like his situation at all, but he needed to know when he wanted Harry and the others to try and get in and it wasn't yet that moment. He needed to secure Regulus so that he wasn't in danger.

"Enough games." Alan said, startling himself with how hoarse he sounded. "I'm here for my Godfather, and I'll leave without casting a single spell if you'll let him go."

Voldemort smiled indulgently. "I have every intention of holding up my end of the bargain this evening. However, this little trip into the Department of Mysteries gave me another thing to think about. Do you know anything about the Department of Mysteries, Alan?"

Alan glared at him. "I've never had the inclination to wonder, no." He hadn't even known it existed.

Voldemort smiled again. "Inside of here is a room lined with baubles that contain every prophecy ever spoken. Inside, one was labelled with my name. A prophecy I only know part of – I suspect you may know that part as well. After all, your father carried the words to me."

Alan felt cold. He hadn't ever considered that what he knew was only part of a whole. It had been suspect, sure, but certainly never important. This could change everything. Alan raised his hand nervously and cast the spell, heating the necklace back up, and continuing the motion through his hair as a nervous gesture not at all out of place. He didn't want to be alone down here if this proved volatile. Hopefully they wouldn't just burst through the doors, Gryffindor-esque.

Voldemort smiled again. “Step closer, Alan, and we’ll both see just how important this prophecy might be.”

Alan damned his curiosity and stepped back up to the edge of the dais, stiffening when Voldemort cast a spell and isolated them from the rest of the room. The Dark Lord grinned. “No need for eavesdroppers. This is just between us.” Either he was not at all disturbed by the portent, or masking it damn well because Alan could feel sweat already trickling down his back.

He let the sphere fall and shatter on the floor just to the side, between them. Out of the mist came the figure of Sybil Trelawney, draped in shawls with large, round glasses, a stricken look on her face as she croaked out the prophecy.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.”

Alan looked up to Voldemort and let the words repeat themselves in his mind. Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives. Intentionally, Alan let his lips quirk up. “Well, that wasn’t the least bit surprising.”

Voldemort was sitting back in his chair a dark look on his face. At Alan’s quip, he, too, smiled thinly. “No, I suppose it wasn’t.” He regarded Alan carefully, and in a strange show, asked, “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what you think you know that I don’t?”

Alan huffed. “I doubt I would if I did know, but I’m willing to say that I am as clueless about that as you are.” Alan spread his hands carefully, “Although there is the factor that I was raised American by a bunch of nutcases with delusions and half-baked ideas coming out their asses, I still suspect you know more than I do and have for a long time. Americans aren’t the only innovators; Dark magic is supposedly just as creative.” Alan carefully smiled. “After all, you’re pushing seventy, aren’t you? I’m barely fifteen.”

“And yet you succeeded in the Triwizard Tournament on your own merit.” Voldemort murmured. “Barely fourteen, and you were entered and chosen over the seventh years in your school.”

“I did not enter my name.” Alan returned.

“Of course not; I did. I wanted to see what kind of child you were, but was only half-expecting you to be chosen. I wanted to know if you were no weakling. If you weren’t good enough to succeed over students your senior, you were no threat, and yet ...” He waved his hand negligently. “And yet you not only were chosen, you won. You defeated the dragon, braved the water, and navigated the maze, reaching the portkey I’d set up and bringing me what I needed to finish the ritual. You are an amazing boy, Alan.” Alan would have called his expression a pout on a lesser man, but Dark Lords do not pout. “Why will you not join me?”

“Because I refuse to be a servant.” Alan returned easily, lightly; almost flippantly as though it were obvious.

“You would not be my servant; you would be my heir. You would have power second only to me; you could command my armies. You have drawn so many powerful students to yourself in school ever so subtly; you rule Slytherin better than Lucius’ son ever could. You have even charmed astray children groomed to serve me, bringing them to your side with ease, a side persecuted by the others and still they follow you. You are the epitome of our bloodline, and yet ...” Voldemort smiled bitterly. “You are much like me. I never would have accepted the offer of even second to but one when I was your age. Very well.” Voldemort waved his hand and brought the silencing ward down. “The deal, Alan. My necklace, your Godfather in one piece, though a little worn. He did betray me, after all, but I suppose he has paid enough. And I promise, if you hold up your end you will walk out together, untouched, to return to Dumbledore.”

Alan held the necklace carefully in his hand, and sighed lightly. “Move him off the dais, first.” He was too damn close to that veil, now that he looked. Too damn close to Voldemort.

"I believe I have the position of power, Alan." Voldemort growled.

Alan looked back up at him. "If I remove the portkey from the string, will you move him off the dais?"

Voldemort nodded, lips tight but smiling slightly. Alan felt so charmed he was amusing him. Alan reached back to unclip the necklace, watching the Death Eater from the corner of his eye. When he slowed his hands on working the clasp, Voldemort impatiently waved the Death Eater off, tugging his sluggish captive. Alan let the necklace pool around the locket that he kept in hand, pulling the ring off and letting it fall. Alan looked up at Voldemort defiantly, hoping, praying; please let him not notice the fake quickly. Alan opened his mouth, and Voldemort's face tightened. Alan continued anyways.

"Let him go." Alan ordered, then added quickly, "Please."

Voldemort raised his wand, "Accio necklace."

Alan barely realized what he'd done, barely acknowledged how many things could happen, when he was jerked painfully by the throat, the two chains he was still wearing cutting into his skin before breaking, one after the other. Alan almost felt relief as they broke; he simply let the locket go to fly into Voldemort's hand and turned to blast the Death Eater holding Regulus in the face. Regulus stumbled, off balance, and Alan saw the door in the corner of his eye burst open, spells flying around the room from the students. Alan made to go to Regulus when something hot and painful slammed into his side and threw him across the room into the risers. Something cracked in his side, 'a rib', and then Alan looked up at a furious Voldemort, who, while angry, did not look surprised.

Please, God, let Geoffrey come soon. His second necklace was a watchkey Geoffrey had bought him after the Graveyard, having heard Alan describe Harry's and deciding that it would really help. With the necklace leaving Alan's person, Geoffrey's would heat unbearably. The adults had to be coming soon, if they could only survive.

Another door broke open; someone screamed, and fires flared, but Alan was staring fearfully back at the gleaming red eyes of Voldemort.

He was waiting; Alan didn't know why. Cautiously, Alan banished his second wand to Regulus, praying he'd pick it up and help. Voldemort's eyes tracked as though he knew Alan was casting but apparently didn't care enough to stop him yet. Well enough.

"I see you brought friends."

"How stupid do I look?" Alan jibed. "I couldn't trust you to keep your word, and well enough that I didn't."

Voldemort shook his head. "I would have let you walk out, Alan, provided the necklace had been real. This," Voldemort let it dangle, and then dissolved the conjuration, "was not. Where is the locket?"

Alan thought long and hard as to whether he should omit the truth, or tell all. "Last I knew, it was with Dumbledore. I couldn't very well get it out of him with him gone from the school, chased out by Umbitch. Had everyone not been gone, I could have asked him for it, or asked after him, but there was no one."

"Purposefully." Voldemort returned thoughtfully. "Velorian has finally proved useful, after dithering for so long. Bellatrix longed to see him again, and I suspected he'd prove feisty in case she stirred him up, proved Lucius a liar. Busying the Ministry with such an international mess would clear out the Ministry most effectively."

Alan's mind raced. Voldemort had sacrificed Lucius on purpose? He wouldn't have. He must have underestimated Velorian's lethality. And was that ... Bellatrix ... God.

"Bellatrix is a sick bitch, isn't she?" Alan offered, shifting and trying to see if he could get up. The Death Eaters were effectively trapping his friends against the walls, leaving him lost in the bottom, alone against Voldemort. Outmatched.

"She most certainly enjoys it," Voldemort smiled. "She greatly appreciated getting to know the Longbottom boy." He looked up the risers and smiled again. "Perhaps I'll let her keep him if he survives, hm?"

Alan saw his eyes move, heard the words and acted. Voldemort had overestimated how close he should risk getting to Alan, and Alan's feet – dressed in heavy army boots, not slippers – slammed into his gut as Alan ignored his screaming rib and kicked the Dark Lord away. Voldemort fell, revealing Regulus weakly duelling his captor and barely holding the upper hand. Alan sent a blasting curse the Death Eater's direction, and then turned to find Voldemort already standing farther back, his wand up to curse Alan. Alan dodged, and sent four spells in rapid succession back, getting around Voldemort's side, and then racing up the stairs. Up ahead of him, Luna was waving her fire whip elegantly, like a ribbon dance save for the burns she left on her flabbergasted opponent. Alan paused, and then ran sideways, stepping up onto a riser and running down the length of the room, turning momentarily to send another two curses that Voldemort had to dodge. Voldemort cast back; Alan jumped down two risers and stumbled, getting his feet tangled in the mixed levels and wasting time, time Voldemort used to curse him and Alan never felt it when he landed on the risers below as his senses exploded in pain.

A high scream woke him, and Alan blinked for several long moments before he could look up and recognize Regulus' wan face.

"Alan, get to your feet. We have to keep moving."

Alan blinked up at him, wondering what had happened to Voldemort, and then he stared listlessly as Regulus turned to send a spell behind himself, slashing deep into a Death Eater's chest, and sending them backwards over another riser.

"Alan, move!"

Alan got up stiffly, and paused when he looked around the room. He wasn't seeing Voldemort, but he was seeing several Death Eaters laid about the floor; small and few, too few, fights still tracing the edges. Where had everyone gone? They must've left the room.

"Voldemort?" Alan asked thickly, standing shakily as he followed Regulus' urging. He slowly began to think again, finding it interesting that Regulus, whom he had come to save, was urging him to leave,

not the other way around. The pain faded with each step, until he could think clearly again. Regulus' words were helping.

"He was knocked off the risers himself after cursing you, and Harry just descended on him like a nightmare. They started trading spells, and I think they disappeared into another room. I can't really remember—" Regulus cut off as the door ahead burst apart, getting ready to fight before he recognized the man emerging.

Alan had never felt so glad to see James Potter in his life, but the man came in and immediately found the nearest fight, descending upon the hapless Death Eater and stunning him, leaving Ginny to gape and then scream,

"Auror Potter, Harry's back in the room we came from with the brains! He chased Voldemort in there!"

Alan felt like his heart had stopped, and he left Regulus without thinking, racing along the riser even as James yelled in shock. The door Ginny had indicated had slammed shut, but Alan sent three curses at it, over-powered blasting curses, and it opened in a shower of debris. Alan was abruptly inside, and nearly tripped over a writhing brain, tentacles of bright memory questing for his ankles. At the far end, two brains were hovering outside a barrier and Harry was screaming on the floor. Alan thanked everything he knew for Harry's auror books, and cast,

"Proctis Penalto!"

The bolt shattered the shield and stabbed into Voldemort's back. The spell ended; Harry gasped for breath, and Voldemort turned around to face Alan. Alan didn't let him catch his breath. Purple flew from his wand, as he stopped himself from casting the killing curse. Harry was too close right then. He hadn't wanted to use it before, but enough was enough. He would kill for his friend.

Voldemort stepped aside from the dark cutting curse, and smiled thinly at Alan. His smile died when James burst through the door, farther back but still there. James' gaze found his son, and Voldemort smiled thinly once more.

"When you said you couldn't get anyone, I hadn't thought you lied."

"I didn't." Alan bit out. "You summoned them yourself, moron."

Voldemort looked at him querulously, but Alan had had enough. He was tired; he cast again, out loud, too tired to think.

"Sectumsempra, reducto, reducto, dulce moxibor!"

Voldemort dodged the three spells, and then blinked rapidly away from the sudden popping blasts of stinging sparks. He screamed when Harry's spell struck from behind, cutting deep into his back and then another hitting below his arm, nearly severing it. Voldemort turned and Harry shielded, the spell pressing down on the barrier and then throwing him back into the wall. Harry hit with a dull thud, and slumped down the wall. James leapt forward and threw Voldemort into the wall in turn. He turned to Alan,

"Get Harry and the others out! We'll hold them off as we can! Run!"

Alan didn't need telling twice. A powerful summoning spell brought Harry's limp form over to him, and Alan quickly attempted an enervate. Harry gasped, and looked up at Alan dimly.

"Harry, we have to get out. Where are the others?"

Harry fumbled and got out his mirror, holding it in one hand as Alan levered him up and out the door. Harry coughed, and called, "Blaise, Get out. Back to the atrium, now!" Harry pocketed it immediately thereafter, and nodded to Alan. Alan quickly pointed his wand towards the middle of the amphitheatre, casting the fireworks spell, making the Order members there look around for the cause. Hopefully they'd notice the kids were leaving. He then hauled Harry with him to the door he'd come in himself, passing a Death Eater holding his head and muttering, curled against the wall, his robes damp. Another was unconscious or dead on the ground, and Alan stepped over him to haul Harry through to the black room, where Blaise was duelling with another Death Eater. Alan, sick and tired of this, negligently used the cutting curse again, not really aiming.

He stared a moment longer when the Death Eater's head split from his shoulders.

Blaise choked, and Harry stared absently at the scene. He looked back up to Alan, and murmured, "Oops?"

Alan shrugged. "I'm ... a little too numb right now." Blaise nodded in turn, and Alan looked around absently. "Where is everyone?"

Blaise shrugged awkwardly. "Scattered. I last saw Neville chasing Bellatrix out of here; Ginny had cornered someone in the room full of sparkling lights, and Luna had joined her. Salvador killed one of them himself and chased another out of the room. Um, sparklies ..." Blaise turned to eye the doors.

Alan finally looked again and found them to be marked with flames, each a different shape or colour. Blaise finally choose a red X and pushed it open, wand ready. He found Luna and Ginny inside, watching them warily in turn. Ginny choked, and ran up to Blaise, clutching him desperately.

"Blaise, this is horrible! I hope they all get caught, but I am so not going after them again. I hate killing! I hate it, especially with it being an accident! The idiot ducked, and ..." She didn't sound broken, just upset, but Alan didn't have time for it.

"Ginny, we need to leave. Have either of you seen Salvador?"

Ginny shook her head, but Luna walked to a door and stuck her head through, shouting, "Salvador! Time to go!"

She stepped back and shrugged, walking up to Alan and smiling at his tightly confused expression. Blaise had pulled Ginny back, so that he could face the room, and Alan waited, watching the door and wondering what was going through Luna's head when Salvador suddenly rolled out and roared the incantation of something, creating a blazing light that shortly disappeared. Someone screamed in agony,

and then Salvador kicked the door fiercely shut. He saw Alan and them and looked around quickly.

“What now, Alan?”

“Retreat. The Order is here, so we just need to get out and they can leave on their own.”

“The Dark Lord?” Salvador asked. Everyone looked at him.

“Last I saw, James was duelling him. He told me to leave. I trust him to hold his own; we have to leave. I won’t get you killed. Let’s go.”

Nobody argued, and Alan walked into the room and huffed. “Where’s the exit?” He asked, noting that the doors slowly swung shut and the room started spinning. Feeling dizzy enough, Alan closed his eyes to wait for the flames to stop, listening as Harry weakly answered,

“It’s the green circle, right?” Harry craned his neck to look over at Blaise where he was supporting Ginny. Blaise shrugged, but Salvador grunted in what sounded like an affirmative. Alan suspected the fight hadn’t been exactly been pleasant for him. Regret gnawed at his stomach, but Alan forcibly pushed it aside, and opened his eyes to find the doors stopped, everyone apparently waiting on him. He looked for the green circle, and then spun with everyone else when a door behind them slammed open. They all turned, raising wands, spells on tongues, when Alan shouted,

“Halt! Regulus?” He called. The dark haired man looked up, and then waved his companions through.

“Alan, get out. We need to go; Moody’s holding Voldemort with Geoffrey. I think the Death Eaters are pretty much down, but we need to hurry.”

Harry made a choked sound, and stood abruptly on his own. Alan glanced between them, and bit his lip. Behind Regulus was Sirius, supporting a limp James. Behind them was a shock of red hair, scanning the corridor warily. She came through last, and the door shut, but the room didn’t spin.

"Here's the way out." Luna called, drawing everyone's eyes. "Oh, look. Alan, we've got company. It's Dumbledore."

Alan felt swamped with relief. He didn't care that he didn't trust the old man: Dumbledore could handle Voldemort. God, he wouldn't get his friends killed after all. Around him, the others sighed as well, and Alan felt a little more strength in his limbs.

"We need to get out anyways. Regulus, we came on thestrals. Can they carry more than one person?"

Harry and Sirius both answered yes, and Alan nodded. "Salvador, go with Blaise and Ginny. Where was Voldemort last?" He turned to look at Sirius, walking over to grab James' other arm. He was almost the same height as Sirius so between them they held James fairly easily. Alan ignored his own trembling legs and helped move to the door, just as Dumbledore came through. He looked immediately at Alan and Alan saw him relax in the remotest sense, almost imperceptibly.

Sirius answered to Dumbledore. "Voldemort was back in the Death Chamber; I'm not sure how well Moody and Geoffrey will be doing."

Dumbledore nodded, and addressed Alan. "Your thestrals are still outside. Take them back to Hogwarts, all of you who can. There is no reason to remain at risk." He turned to Harry. "Neville is waiting at the Fountain of Magical Brethren. He waits to leave with the rest of you."

They all nodded, and moved down the hallway as quickly as they could, leaving behind the Department of Mysteries. Alan almost laughed at the motley group they made. He knew he'd collapse in a near dead faint when he stopped running on his high, and Harry was probably the same. James was unconscious, and Ginny was fighting back tears. Lily kept to the back, but she looked fairly fresh, if not very pissed off. Salvador was angrier than Alan had seen him in a long time, and he didn't even know how Regulus was conscious, either. Luna seemed the least disturbed of them all, but Alan noticed her gravitating around Regulus. He approved; he'd need somebody to catch him when he inevitably collapsed.

The lifts couldn't take them all at once, so they split in two. Alan took the one with Sirius, James, Regulus and Luna while the others went together in their own. They rode in silence, save for James groaning at the noise. Alan swallowed the desire to cry in relief. He hadn't gotten anyone killed yet. Thank God. Thank God.

At the top, Alan stumbled out, his legs beginning to ache to collapse, but Luna braced him until he could stand again. As he stood, the other lift arrived and opened. Harry immediately staggered out, his arm braced on Ginny's shoulders but as soon as he looked over and found Neville, he stood on his own and shouted, "Neville!"

The figure seated on the lip of the fountain stood up carefully, but didn't move towards them immediately. Alan shrugged and urged Sirius to move towards the exit: he wanted out of here, and he wanted to pass out. He couldn't do either until he was back at Hogwarts. That meant walking. Everyone just followed him, as they had done to come here. The weight of the expectation was suffocating.

Neville approached them as they came over, and immediately grabbed Harry's shoulders, pulling him against him in an almost-hug, and then supporting him. "Harry, you're passing out."

"Just about." Harry agreed. "What happened?"

Neville shrugged casually, and then stepped aside, waving his hand to the other side of the fountain. Laid out on the floor, Bellatrix stared blindly at the ceiling in death. Blood pooled slightly beneath her head, marking the edge of her mouth as well. Alan was only mildly surprised he felt nothing. The deaths meant nothing to him anymore. He might react some come tomorrow, when he wasn't riding a high, but right now it didn't matter.

"Nice." Alan drawled carelessly. "The thestrals are waiting, and I'm in pain. I'd rather have this all over, thanks. That means leaving. Regulus, Merlin, Mary and Mordred, find someone and lean on their shoulder before you collapse. Lily's free. Harry, you too. We need to

get out of this damn place and get back to the thestrals we left at the visitor's entrance."

Strangely, everyone listened, and they did get back up the entrance to where the thestrals waited, the night finally dark. That was a little more difficult. Harry blinked upon getting up there and then rubbed his eyes as he stepped out of the way. Ginny didn't take it well; she curled against Blaise and started sobbing hysterically. Blaise seemed to be in shock, as he didn't really react either, and just stared blankly before offering, "Alan, those are ugly as sin."

"Strangely enough, they're mostly an indication we just did sin, you moron." Salvador snapped. "But they're our ride back. Everyone who's fainting needs to ride with someone who isn't."

Alan nodded dizzily. "I kinda gathered. Sirius, you can take James, I presume. Luna's with me, Neville with Harry ... I presume Ginny will want to stay with Blaise." Alan wavered as he looked between Salvador and Lily. "Lily, please would you go with Regulus, unless you'd rather be with your husband. That's between you and Sirius, I suppose. Sal, you're fine on your own?"

Regulus was nodding carefully, waiting for the decision and leaning on a thestral. Salvador huffed at Alan, staring slightly. Alan presumed he looked stricken. He wasn't making much effort to look like some cold Slytherin right now, but he hurt and his Godfather was hurt. He was feeling too damn much. The pain was reminding him of the graveyard, and he really just wanted to curl up and nurse his wounds, but there seemed little choice. He just hoped Luna could actually help him stay on if he passed out. Nobody seemed to doubt the arrangements, though, and everybody else was pulling each other onto the thestrals everyone could now see. Luna blinked warmly up at Alan, and Alan smiled weakly back before hauling himself onto the thestral he'd chosen. Luna got up easily and pressed against his back, a warm presence as Alan draped himself over the thestral's back.

"I've got you, Alan. Just go ahead and relax."

Alan smiled back at her, and let his eyes close as Sirius told the thestral where to go, holding onto his brother. The thestrals leapt into

the air, following Sirius, and Alan just let his eyes slide shut, hands fisted in the thestral's mane, Luna's arm around his waist.

A/C: Yeah. Distracted. Can you blame here? Here is your late Christmas and New Year's. If I had more time outside work, I'd put up the second chapter too but I suppose it can wait. Enjoy? You gotta love the DoM. It's just so damn wonderful, easy and useful, isn't it?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-six

Alan woke when he was abruptly jostled again. He was quite comfortable where he was and had no desire to make his sore and screaming limbs move. However, the motion was insistent, and he blearily opened his eyes. He couldn't think for a long moment, and wondered if he'd even opened his eyes, as the night was so very dark. Finally, though, he just sighed and slid down, leaning against the thestral up until it moved away, dropping him. The fall reminded him instantly that he'd broken a rib: he writhed in pain on the ground. Luna knelt by his face and soothed him as he stopped moving and just let the pain subside behind his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, Alan realized he must have passed out. Someone was gently slapping his cheeks, and when he groaned, a light voice drove some of his headache away. He loved Luna's voice. She had to speak again before he actually understood what she was saying.

"You're going to have to wake up if you want us to be getting you inside. There's too many people to carry, you know, so some of you have to wake up, and it's kinda defaulted on you because we're not sure what's wrong with Harry either."

Alan woke up quickly at that. "Harry's out?"

Luna gave him a slight smile, looking completely spaced out. Her tone was perfectly reasonable. "He fell asleep while riding with Neville and we haven't been able to wake him. Regulus did a little convulsion and passed out too. You just need to walk on your own. Neville and Ginny can take Harry, and Lily and Salvador can help hold the men, but I don't think I can carry you."

Alan nodded carefully, and looked around, finally registering where they were. The forest was dark this evening, and the thestrals had wandered deeper into the woods. He saw none of them. A little ways away, Regulus and James were both lying down; Lily's red hair was by a smaller figure curled up a little ways away. Worried, Alan fought to sit up. His rib screamed at him, and he groaned as he lay back down, fighting the urge to writhe. It would not make him feel any

better. Pomfrey had most unfortunately not been able to cover the rib spell as well as he would have liked, so he couldn't risk healing himself. Finally, he could speak again.

"Luna, can you help me up? I don't want to move my rib again."

"Certainly."

With Luna's help, he not only sat up, but with Sirius on his other side, Alan managed to stand. He could maintain that fairly well on his own, but he felt like he was primed to fall over again. Cautiously, he looked at James and Regulus, but neither was that interesting: he cared surprisingly little for James at the moment, and Regulus' state was inevitable and required trained Healers, but Harry was another matter. He felt far more responsible for Harry's injuries. He stumbled over and looked down at Lily, feeling like his heart was in his eyes. She looked up and softened; he might not have been very wrong about that.

"He's asleep, but muttering. I'm not sure what's wrong, but ... I don't think it's much. Sirius thinks we should get in to somewhere on the main floor or lower and then bring Poppy down to us. Umbridge is currently still in power, and they need medical attention now, and Poppy's silence is preferable to making a fuss in St. Mungo's in the current climate. It will be possibly another hour before I suspect Dumbledore can regain his hold on Hogwarts, but even so this is safer than Headquarters with a closer healer."

Alan nodded. "Pomfrey will be more than happy to help. Luna can go get her once we're settled. I can get us into my father's quarters; nothing should be in the labs, so she'll be able to work there, or on his or my bed. It's fairly close."

Lily nodded easily. "Alright. Do you have Harry's map?"

Alan nodded shortly, and turned, "Luna, do you remember which pocket Harry put his bag in?"

"Left front. It's just shrunk; but he's only got the cloak. Neville has the map."

Alan looked around and found Neville apparently napping against a tree across the clearing. “Neville!” He called carefully. Neville twitched awake, and frowned at Alan, standing stiffly.

“What?”

“We need to check the map. We’re heading in to my dad’s rooms, and need to avoid Umbridge.”

Neville walked over, pulling the map out and muttering something before tapping it and flipping it open. Sirius came over, curious, followed by Salvador. Ginny and Blaise were cuddling against another tree, watching but not moving. They were close enough to hear everything. Lily had gotten out the cloak and was smoothing it carefully across her lap.

“We’ve got Pansy patrolling with Julianna in the halls, but currently they’re on the far path. In the front hall, there’s no one; Umbridge is pacing in her room. Pomfrey is bustling about her infirmary, still awake and Filch is in the dungeons with ... Oh dear. Looks like the twins finally got it. They should survive the night, at least. Not like it’ll be happening again.”

Lily’s lips had thinned, but she only nodded thoughtfully. “Alright, we’ll be in the clear, then?”

“Pretty much.” Neville shrugged.

“Let’s go, then.”

Lily and Neville managed the slighter Regulus, while Sirius and Salvador braced James, followed by Ginny and Blaise with Harry. Alan held the map while Luna walked beside him, the cloak draped over her arm and helping him keep both his balance and a cursory watch. They ran into no trouble getting into the dungeons and Severus’ quarters; only the Bloody Baron saw them and merely nodded before drifting away. He liked Alan; he wouldn’t report anything on him.

Everyone got inside without incident, and Luna draped herself in the cloak and bustled upstairs to get Pomfrey, Alan worriedly watching her with the map, his mirror in hand as Luna held onto Blaise's for in case Alan needed to contact her.

Around him, Blaise and Ginny had curled up on one of the sofas, Ginny finally calming down. Salvador was leaning against the wall and glaring at air; Neville was brooding on the couch. Lily and Sirius were cleaning and cushioning the lab tables to use for Harry, Regulus and James. Alan was considering calling Lyall about getting one of the Alfaerus to help with the healing, but he didn't want to do so quite yet. He'd offer when Pomfrey got here.

"Alan!"

Alan jumped, and picked up his mirror. It hadn't been Luna's voice; it was Geoffrey's. Breathing fast, Alan answered, "I'm here! Geoffrey, what's going on?" Around him, everyone turned half their attention to listen.

"You're safe?"

"Severus' quarters." Alan answered easily. "Luna's fetching Pomfrey. I trust her; she hates Umbridge. She won't breathe a word."

Geoffrey nodded abruptly. "Don't be afraid to call Lyall and get Autumn or Mellisande. We're finally wrapping things up; I'm in St. Mungo's, but I'll be out and about by tomorrow, same as most of the others."

"Any injuries?" Alan asked, worried.

Geoffrey nodded solemnly. "A couple. Alice Longbottom is worst; she got on the wrong end of a nasty spell, but it's looking pretty good. Unless something unexpected turns up, she should only be in for a week or so. Frank got knocked out with her, but they should be waking him soon for a better check. Severus had only minor injuries I had to make him get treated, stubborn ass. Alastor got knocked about pretty badly and I," Geoffrey blushed, "accidentally shot him when him and the Fuck Lord changed places a little too quickly. Kingsley

Shacklebolt came out pretty much clean, and Sirius' cousin is banged up a bit too, but she's coming around. So, nothing severe. How are things on your end?"

Alan shrugged, smiling slightly. "I think we're all a little sore; I know I am. Lily and Sirius seem to be alright, as do Luna, Salvador, and Blaise. Ginny accidentally killed someone so she's a little choked up," Alan instinctively ducked and felt fortunate as the shoe sailed overhead. "She's getting over it fine." Alan hastily added, but frowned as he moved on. "Neville's being pretty quiet but looks alright, and Harry and James are unconscious, and so is Regulus."

"The people you left behind?" Geoffrey asked. Alan wasn't too surprised; he'd mentioned his group to Geoffrey, and knew the man would be disappointed if Alan hadn't covered his ass at Hogwarts as well.

"Fred and George are in detention, but nothing really bad should happen, I hope." Alan chewed his lip a moment, and nodded carefully. "Jonas is in Ravenclaw, so I suspect he's fine. Everyone but Fred and George are in their dormitories, so from the information I have, it went alright." Alan frowned as he continued. "I know Filch has more chains than that, so ..." He stubbornly didn't continue the thought.

Geoffrey simply nodded. "Good. All right, I'll let you go. Don't be afraid to contact home, all right? Lyall just might kill you if you let Regulus go without proper care."

Alan smiled weakly, and blinked as the corners of the mirror flashed; another person was trying to contact him. "Alright, Geoffrey. Someone else is talking at me, so I have to go."

Geoffrey nodded understandingly and cut the line; immediately Luna's face arrived, smiling serenely. "I've got her just fine, Alan. We're on our way."

"Thank you, Luna." Alan breathed. "Hurry?"

"Of course, Alan." Her tone was negligent, her expression far away. Alan just smiled and let her go, leaning back against the couch.

After several minutes of just staring blankly at the ceiling in a room full of silence, he turned and looked over Neville's way. Neville was still silent in his spot, watching his hands fuss in his lap. Alan scooted over and quietly offered, "Hey." Neville was out of the semi-group, and a quiet conversation would probably go unheard in the general preoccupation around them. Neville's eyes flicked over at him, and then back to his lap. Alan didn't leave, and finally Neville relaxed minutely.

"I'm not entirely sure it was the best choice I made. To go after her like that. To ... kill." He admitted softly.

Alan leaned aside, not watching Neville's face at all and only really seeing his hands as he answered. "Do you regret it?"

"Not really, no. She deserved to die." Neville's voice was unsure, weak. He wasn't confident about it.

"I think, ..." Alan hesitated, filtering the words he'd heard from Voldemort, "I think she ... you weren't her only victim, like that. Voldemort ... I'd really have to double-check, but I suspect ... she did ... something like that ... to another boy. She liked it. She did ... She was in the wrong, Neville."

"Doesn't warrant killing." Neville murmured. "I'm not going to beat myself up over it, I'm just ... uncomfortable."

"Do you feel ... more free?" Alan asked quietly.

"I know it won't happen again." Neville immediately answered. "Isn't that the same thing?"

Alan smiled carefully, and then eyed the map. Quickly, almost impulsively, Alan gave Neville a one-armed hug. The boy laughed, and pushed him away, his eyes smiling with the rest of his face.

"Goofball. Go let Luna and Pomfrey in."

Alan awkwardly stood and did so, smiling tightly. Pomfrey saw his drawn face and immediately told him to stand still, stepping inside and letting Luna shut the door as she cast a quick diagnostic spell. She found the rib immediately, along with several other things, including a mild complication from his continuous motion thereafter. Her bag came out, and Alan tried to turn her aside. She wasn't hearing it.

"I can clearly tell there's a room full of people here that aren't seeing a healer other than me, and while I heard from Luna you have three unconscious, I'm going through this room first because you all need attention and if you haven't died in the hour-long trip back, you're not going to die for fifteen minutes. Drink this," She thrust a phial into his hands, "and stand up straight. Someone get behind him; healing ribs is unpleasant but he can't sit."

Alan groaned and submitted. Neville came up behind him and, at Pomfrey's urging, gently took Alan's arms to prevent him from falling or thrashing too much. When she cast the spell, Alan could tell why. It didn't hurt, but it was damn close. The feeling left him nauseated, and Neville's arms tightened to keep him upright as he swayed, his knees not buckling only because he leaned back into Neville. Things were not supposed to move like that under your skin; it just wasn't healthy. It was over in a few minutes, and she gave him another potion and told him to sit if he was stubborn, or lie down if he didn't want a sore neck from falling asleep on the couch. Naturally, Alan sat down. Neville got checked over next. He wasn't badly injured; he'd ended most of the spells he'd been hit with himself, and Pomfrey healed a cracked bone, refined several healed cuts, and then gave him a potion with the same admonition Alan had gotten. Neville went to the couch and summoned a pillow, lying at the armrest, the pillow under his shoulders. Compromise.

Salvador was in similar condition to Neville, and he sat at the wall, as reticent as he'd been since Alan had run into him earlier in the evening. It was unlike him; Alan had only seen him like this before at the beginning of the year when his parents had given him their ultimatum about Voldemort. He was free of them, though, so Alan couldn't imagine what was going through his mind now. However, he'd have to pry later.

Blaise and Ginny were more of the same: minor spells, exhaustion. Blaise had suffered the Cruciatus, and Ginny got a calming draught, Blaise a painkiller. Neither moved from their armchair, and Pomfrey looked over them again. Eyeing Alan she frowned again.

"Mr. Longbottom, please haul Mr. Prince into his bedroom and tuck him in, because if he's still out here when I get back, I will haul him there myself and stick him in place with a sticking charm until I come back to check on him in the morning." Pomfrey turned a full glare on Alan. "You have bruised ribs and minor internal damage and bleeding that that potion is healing right now, and it will be best for you to be horizontal."

"But if you have difficulty, I can get someone from Salem," Alan tried. Pomfrey cut him off.

"The floo is being watched, as are the doors. Just because your little escapade escaped notice doesn't mean another will. Nobody will be coming in at the moment, and if I get that desperate, I will haul in a mediwizard from here with the same likely effects. If I desperately need such help, I will wake you. Bed. Now."

Alan stopped arguing and let Neville help him there. Alan yawned and sidled over to one side, murmuring sleepily that he doubted Severus would get in, and that that bed could be taken as well. Neville had smiled weakly, and the last thing Alan remembered before falling asleep was Neville murmuring he only needed to sit a moment ...

||||

Alan woke in the morning feeling groggy, but comfortable. He stretched out in bed, and heard someone beside him mutter and grumble. Looking over, Alan was surprised for a moment to see Neville's golden brown head ducking under the covers. Alan stifled a laugh. Lovely. He struggled out from under the blankets, and only noticed his motion breeching a spell when it reacted and rippled in his sight. He glanced up at the door in time to watch it open for Lily Potter.

She smiled upon seeing him up. "Good morning, Alan. It's about eleven in the morning."

Alan nodded. "How's everyone?"

Lily came and sat on the edge of the bed, next to Alan. Neville had raised his head out of the blankets to listen, unwilling to sit up himself. Lily nodded to him, and looked at Alan.

"Harry should be fine. He was cursed; trapped in nightmares, but it was a simple spell to break. Combined with being exhausted under the Cruciatus, he simply fainted. James was in similar condition; both of them had minor concussions, among other smaller spells and cuts."

Alan nodded carefully, and watched her as he asked, "Regulus?"

Lily's face tightened. "I don't currently know, but it was bad. He's alive, and not in immediate danger of dying, but as soon as Dumbledore retook control of the school, Pomfrey sent him through to Salem. We haven't heard back yet."

Alan nodded carefully, fighting back tears. He didn't like this at all; he was really worried about Regulus. "When can I see him?"

Lily shrugged carefully. "The healers at Salem refuse to let anyone visit at the moment, and informed me they'd send a message when you could." She found a small smile. "They anticipated your need."

Alan nodded quietly. "How's everyone else?"

"Healing. Nobody else is in any danger."

"The Weasley twins?"

"Fine, and healed." Lily's dark expression quirked with a small smile. "They didn't seem at all deterred by the punishment, either."

Alan smiled weakly, and nodded. He wasn't surprised they weren't. "How's Salvador? Have the others gone back to their dorms?"

"Ginny and Blaise curled up and slept on the couch; I slept in Severus' room with Sirius. After Dumbledore came back, Pomfrey moved Harry and James up to the hospital wing. I think Salvador went back to his dorm."

Alan nodded – Salvador wouldn't have hung around, and without the threat of more detention, he was unlikely to leave the school either. Alan couldn't fully appreciate his position – Salvador was stuck on a thin line of where his loyalty should lie, and while joining the Baker's removed the expectation of Voldemort, it left him with an obligation to them Alan didn't fully understand. Either way, it was confusing and Alan didn't know what to make of it. Prying, however, would be most unwelcome. He'd have to do it later when he could be a little more careful about it.

"Can I get up and about?"

Lily stood. "I'll go tell Poppy you two are awake and she'll be able to tell you that upon a second look. If you get out of that bed before I get back, you will be in trouble, though."

Alan nodded easily. He knew how stubborn healers were after near-death experiences, especially Poppy. Right now, he wasn't in the mood to argue. If she was just coming, he could wait five minutes. Lying back down was tempting, but if he fell asleep again, Poppy would not wake him back up. He'd had more than enough sleep for the time being, so he turned to look at Neville, who wasn't sleeping either, although he was still lying down.

"Feeling saucy again, Alan?" Neville asked carefully.

Alan nodded. "I've slept more than twelve hours. I feel fine." Neville looked amused, and Alan cut off his possible sceptical remark. "What happened on your end, anyways?"

Neville shrugged nonchalantly. "Nothing much. We listened to Harry's prompt, got down in one group, with Salvador using the spell for magic sight – we didn't find anyone in the Atrium, you know – and still did a little scout around the room before taking the stairs down. The

lift is too damn noisy, and I flatly refused to use it when there was a perfectly serviceable stairwell that was much easier to control. Either way, we were downstairs and waiting before you called us in again. We split into two groups in the Department of Mysteries, and I was with Blaise and Ginny. Harry mirror-called me to tell me to break in immediately, so we joined the fight and within five minutes, Bellatrix had singled me out and, well, I didn't disagree on that."

Alan could tell he was certainly simplifying his fight with Bellatrix: he was clearly uncomfortable about it, but Alan refused to press. He didn't want to talk about the prophecy, either, and was extremely grateful he didn't have to – no one else knew about it being revealed. He probably should, but not yet. Just not yet.

"Well." Poppy huffed, coming through the door. "I see you're both awake. Sit still, Mr. Prince."

Alan remained perfectly still as she cast several diagnostic spells, running up and down and checking that everything was in order. "The sleep did you good," She gruffly admitted, "I don't see anything that needs to be attended to anymore, and everything from your rib has cleared up. You're free to go, Alan, just don't get in another fight, would you?"

Alan smiled roguishly. "Umbridge is gone; Draco should be sulking if he's managed to find out his father's dead. Who would I pick a fight with?"

"Draco." Neville and Poppy both answered at once.

Alan snorted, and sighed. "I won't pick a fight with him if he wants to grieve. If it happens, he'll be the one picking the fight with me." Alan hesitated, and looked up cautiously at Poppy. "May I visit Harry?"

Poppy nodded, and turned to circle the bed to check on Neville. "Yes, you may visit him but if he's asleep don't rouse him. And don't make too much noise; James is sedated and needs to remain there a few more days."

"Something tells me the sedative is more to keep him in the hospital wing than to help him heal."

Poppy sniffed. "Rest is essential to any healing." She cracked a small smile. "But yes, in this case it's more to keep him in place. So don't wake him. And you, Mr. Longbottom, should be fine to leave as well if you feel up to it."

Neville shrugged, and lay back in the bed comfortably. "I'm thinking I'll stay here if Prince doesn't mind me occupying his bed. At least for another hour or so. Any chance of getting a book?"

Alan snorted. "I don't mind. Summon one off the shelf – I barely remember what all I keep in here." Alan eyed the bookshelf and snorted. "Mostly stuff I don't want to risk Drakey stealing. You might like the compare/contrast book compiled by the Bakers I got recently. It's some Brit arguing that the European innovations of the last decade are better than the American."

Neville raised his eyebrow, and Alan shrugged. "It's basically the one-upmanship game in writing. Personally, I think the Brits have done very well and gotten a lot more practical stuff done," Alan winked, "but then again, I just might be feeling particularly British recently."

Neville summoned the book in question, and gave Alan a despairing look. "A Brit with that kind of an accent ... that's just preposterous, Alan. You sound way too American." Neville flipped the book open, and blinked. "Is it just me, or are there a disproportionate number of Alfaerus on the American side of the list?"

"It's only the first page, really. It's a long book, and listed alphabetically. It's just a large family, is all, and none of them are practical. You won't notice by looking, but a lot of the Brits are Hodges and their affiliates in turn."

"The Modern Possibilities of Sixth Century Magical Petticoat Starch" Neville read out. "Impractical, I'll say. Just a little."

Alan shrugged, "Nicholas Harper's essay is certainly worth checking out," and turned to regard his closet for the day, wondering just how

out of it he was to have completely missed Poppy's exit. He was very distracted. Self-preservation told him to find one of his coterie before wandering the halls; they usually didn't mind accompanying him, and he was a walking target with how tired he was. Why had Poppy given him leave? Probably because she knew how stubborn he was. Dressed in fresh clothes, Alan walked back out and smiled at Neville, saluting the distracted bookworm and walking out without waiting for him to notice. He was already absorbed in the book.

The dungeons didn't faze Alan at all, and most fortuitously, he walked into the common room and found his group right off. They also found him, and he was immediately enveloped in a hug from Stephanie and her friends – apparently hiding their allegiance wasn't a concern anymore. Behind them came a worried Theodore and Tracey. Suspiciously absent were Lucille and Salvador. Alan pulled free from the hugs and realized he couldn't find Dillan either. Alan tilted his head at Tracey, who shrugged stiffly – she was hiding something.

"Tracey, where's Pupp and the Bakers?"

Tracey looked away, and Morgan answered, "Lucille is having a talk with Salvador in some corner of the dungeons, and Dillan left early this morning without a word. Haven't seen either of them. I presume you know where Blaise is?"

Alan nodded. "Blaise is still catnapping in my dad's quarters with his ginger. I just needed to make a trip up to visit Harry, and wanted a bit of backup. I'm still feeling a tad faint, and Pomfrey didn't see the point in trying to keep me down."

Tracey rolled her eyes immediately. "Smart woman. C'mon, Theodore. Let's go tail the little snakehead. Lead on, Lord and Master." She bowed deeply and mocked. Alan stuck his tongue out at her, and opened the common room door, bowing Tracey out in turn. She laughed again, and Theodore followed her with an exasperated look. Alan wondered just how much longer he'd put up with her, and then shrugged and caught up with the two of them. It was Theodore's choice.

Getting to the hospital wing was uneventful, and Alan waved Tracey and Theodore off to go find a broom closet nearby while he wandered inside. Poppy looked up at his approach, and pointed curtly to the first curtained off bed, her attention returning with hardly a change to the files she was flipping through. Alan walked over and brushed them open. He was disappointed to find Harry asleep.

Alan huffed. Admittedly, Harry did look much better, and the turnaround was better than he could have expected. Very few of them were badly injured. Alan hadn't heard the consensus on Luna, Ginny, or Blaise, but apparently none of them were suffering anything life threatening. James, Harry, and Regulus ... Alan's chest hurt at the thought of Regulus. He didn't want to think about it; it hurt. He felt so helpless.

Alan turned and left the Hospital wing quickly, stalking around the corner and down the hall, heading up towards the Gryffindor common room. He needed to talk to somebody, preferably somebody with something to tell him. He hoped the twins were in the common room, or someone. Alan knocked on the Fat Lady and waited. Several moments later, a curious second year pushed it open and squeaked.

"What are you doing here?" His eyes were practically popping out of his face.

"I'm looking for either the Weasley twins or Melanie Longbottom. Or Nanna Potter. Are any of them in?"

"And what if they don't want to talk to you?" The second year was apparently trying to be brave. Alan didn't have any patience for it.

"Look, I'm being polite." Alan snapped. "I could just push past you. Either get one of the people in question and let them deal with the question of whether they want to talk to some damn Slytherin or not, or I will find my way in there. Capiche?"

The boy paled and looked like he was trying to think of a way to put him down when suddenly Melanie showed up behind him and glared. "Hey, Jimmy, scat. Alan, what are you doing here?"

Alan struggled with the answer for a long moment, and then shrugged helplessly. "Looking for someone to talk to. I was just cleared by the dragon, and was looking for an answer as to how everything went back here."

Melanie smiled slightly. "Alright. Nanna's out anyways, and Romilda is getting overwhelming." She slipped out of the portrait hole and then shut it. "Password's 'Trinket' for this week, you know."

"Why Melanie, sharing Gryffindor secrets are we?" Alan teased. He waited a moment, and then started walking slowly down the halls, Melanie easily keeping pace.

"You're Gryffindor enough."

Alan scoffed. "The Sorting Hat didn't even consider putting me in Gryffindor for a moment."

"That's because you're stubborn, and you've got that bloodline problem." Melanie returned. "It's just unfortunate. Besides, you wanted to know what went down here, anyways."

Alan nodded silently, waiting expectantly. Melanie took a moment to think, and then began.

"Well, it was a bit of a mess just after you left – apparently everyone was going on about you running away and taking out Draco in the Entrance Hall. Umbridge was furious, but when she went back to her office to find some things, your backup kicked in – Jonas had sealed off her office, and something was smashing everything up." Melanie smiled in remembrance. "So she turned to find somewhere else, but the twins had heard of her little fit, and trapped her – they set off another swamp on one side, and a box of fireworks on another. After that, they got to work and created a huge gauntlet from there on through the entire floor, and turned the staircases up into slides, and the staircases down were littered with traps. The school was trapped in an outright standstill. Down in Slytherin, a huge fight broke out between the two factions – curses everywhere. Everyone else took off into hiding. Most of Ravenclaw went to the library or their common room and didn't come out, same with Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. The

secret passages were still good, save the most obvious, so there was a bit of traffic. It's a good thing all the OWLs and NEWTs were over."

"The Twins were in detention when we got back." Alan observed.
"Though that sounds like something that was a right pity to miss."

Melanie shrugged. "If you want to encounter chaos incarnate, I suppose it was entralling."

Alan shrugged nonchalantly, hiding his discomfort. "Can't be worse than Voldemort and twelve Death Eaters."

Melanie shuddered. "I can't believe you walked into that."

"Quite literally." Alan quipped; feeling tired himself just remembering.
"So, how did it all fall apart?"

"Umbridge slogged through the swamp, and forced her way through the halls. The Inquisitorial Squad had gotten kicked out of the Slytherin dorms eventually, and turned on Fred and George, eventually cornering them after running a gauntlet of the twins and supportive students. By about that time, Umbridge was out, and Filch was practically bald from all the hair-pulling fits he'd gone into. You know, I heard that Dumbledore might be firing Filch after this."

Alan shuddered and shrugged, even though his blood was burning. God, he hoped Dumbledore fired him. He'd mention it to Geoffrey; maybe he could put on a bit of pressure to make it happen. "Melanie, you never got detention did you?"

"Hell no." She shook her head vigorously. "Neville would have done something stupid. I kept Nanna out of it, too, which was a job and a half."

"Thank you."

Melanie turned and looked at him again. "How is everyone? Lily came and spoke to Nanna early this morning, and I got news of my parents, but I stayed here ..." She was clearly uncomfortable about it, but Alan couldn't imagine why. "Lily wasn't offering any details, and neither

was McGonagall after I said I didn't want to leave yet. Apparently my mum and dad are still out; Connor's staying with Ginger."

Alan shrugged, unconcerned about addressing Melanie's clear personal discomfort. "Neville's downstairs and fine; so are Ginny and Blaise, last I heard. Harry's still out cold in the hospital wing, and so is James. Lily also is doing fine. Nobody is in danger of dying." Although Alan was still suspicious about just how fine a difference that was. It was curious that no one was apparently suffering long-term effects. It could just be good luck, but right now Alan didn't want to be betting on that. He hadn't been all that attentive when Pomfrey was treating everyone else.

He came to a stop in the hallway, and looked around. He didn't know where he was, and also didn't quite care. Melanie was nodding carefully.

"Where is everyone that you know about?"

"Fred and George disappeared towards the dungeons; I suspect they might be remaking some of the stores they used. Jonas took them aside again; I don't have the faintest clue what he's on about with that, but they're not looking worried." Melanie fixed Alan with a glare as though putting the blame on him. "I've heard nothing but trouble about him, you know. Luna doesn't have much to say about him because he always ignored her, but everyone else doesn't have one word of good to say. He's a bully and a cheat, and he doesn't like anyone and no one likes him either."

Alan snorted. "I've heard nothing good about him either, and I hear from Dillan who's lived with him. Jonas is a liar and a cheat, but he's powerful, clever, and skilled; he'd make an excellent politician, really."

Melanie snorted. "Okay, Alan. So, why are you here anyways? You don't usually seek me out."

Alan shrugged. "Nobody else to talk to. Do you want to swing by the Hospital wing to see if Harry's awake, or would you rather visit Neville? He's staying in bed, reading a book full of essays I have. I

can't remember who published it, but they were arguing if the Brits had more ideas than the Americans this past decade."

"Who won?" Melanie asked.

Alan flashed her a smile. "His opinion was that the Brits were more useful, naturally. He was British."

"And yours?"

Alan put his fingers to his lip. "I agree. Despite a full fifth of the American essays being from the Alfaerus."

Melanie gaped. "A full fifth?"

Alan shrugged. "It only highlighted one hundred essays from each country. Nineteen of the American ones were by Alfaerus; three others were by cousins. Mind, the family is quite large, and a lot of them live locked in some tower or other trying to figure some odd thing out. They had to cut some corners, obviously, so they may have chosen Alfaerus works on purpose. Those tend to be a little frivolous. Hey, do you want to visit Neville or no?"

"Neville." Melanie nodded, starting walking down the hall, Alan following. "And what do you mean, frivolous?"

"Like, modern uses for magical Petticoat starch frivolous."

Melanie blinked. "What?"

"That's my point. Strangely enough, that one was done by Autumn, my aunt."

"Who puts an essay like that in a book trying to showcase talent?"

Alan snickered. "I strongly suspect the person who published it wasn't being entirely professional, but it makes for a very interesting read, particularly Nicholas Harper's 'Varied Uses of Acromantula Silk'"

Melanie blinked at him. “How’s that interesting? Can you make clothes out of it?”

Alan looked sidelong at Melanie, and decided to answer succinctly, “With much difficulty, yes.” But the essay certainly didn’t cover that.

“Weird that a guy wrote that.” Melanie looked forward again. Alan schooled his face blank and didn’t correct her.

The talk was pretty banal the rest of the way down the school. A few people paused and stared at them, but most of the students were uninterested in the various rumours floating around and were either indifferent, or distracted. Alan was grateful. The surveillance in the Ministry would probably be referenced and verified soon enough, and then the papers would be shrieking either for his blood, or, possibly, singing his praises. He wasn’t sure which would be more aggravating, but he didn’t have to deal with it right now. They returned to Severus’ quarters unhindered.

Alan let Melanie in before him, politely, and then stepped into the doorway and ducked – Tracey’s shoe flew over his head. She summoned it back, and it thumped into his leg before skirting it and flying back to her hands.

“Where the Hell did you get off to, Alan?” Tracey shrieked. “You ask us to accompany you, and ditch us at the first turn! What gives, you –” Theodore corked her up before she could start swearing, but he, too, was frowning at Alan. Blaise, seated still with Ginny in his lap, wasn’t looking much happier. Ginny, however, was ecstatic to see Melanie, and stood and pulled her into the couch immediately, regaling her with tales of her daring. Blaise didn’t rise, something that concerned Alan immediately. He walked over and frowned.

“What gives, Blaise? Usually you’d be wrestling me to the floor.”

“Poppy may be an excellent healer, but Death Eaters are creative.” Blaise groused. “I’m still healing and not allowed to stand. It should run its course by this evening, but still.”

Alan didn't speak for a long moment, and Blaise frowned at him. "Hey, don't you dare go Gryffindor on me."

"What, I'm not allowed to be upset if I dragged you into danger?" Alan snapped.

"No, you're not." Blaise firmly returned. "Because you're first, deluding yourself, and second, forgetting that we did better than some Aurors and lastly, just because you wanted to go didn't mean I couldn't have kept you back. I went because I wanted to, I accepted the risk, and I'm dealing with it. If you start getting choked up about it, I'll have Lucille sit on you."

"Gee, thanks." Alan growled. However, it had helped. He was now more pissed off at Blaise than he was sympathetic. "How many other injuries am I clueless about that Poppy decided to lie to me about?"

"None that I know. I think Poppy didn't honestly share everyone's condition on purpose to prevent such a Gryffindor reaction."

"Meddlesome bint." Alan growled. Someone's shoe collided with his head, and Alan turned and straightened with a snarl, "Which of you goddamn whores threw your damn shoe at me? I've had enough of that!"

Ginny stood, fire in her eyes. "You do not call me a whore, Alan! I don't care how pissed off you are—"

"I'd noticed. You don't care about anybody but your boyfriend, do you?"

"You're just being sour because you have to control everything!"

"I don't control anybody, in case you hadn't noticed you horrible little—"

"As if you're any better, strutting around like you own the place, typical Slytherin—"

"Haven't noticed you're dating one, have you, you confused Gryffindor—"

“Shut - Up!”

Alan and Ginny slammed their mouths shut and straightened. Melanie calmed from her scream and stalked between the two of them. She turned and pushed Ginny's shoe into her chest hard enough to knock her back onto the couch, snarling, “Sit!” She then turned to Alan, her eyes hard and dark. After several moments of contemplation, during which Alan wasn't sure what to think, Melanie huffed, and then drew back and slapped him.

Alan almost lost his balance; he staggered, barely catching himself, and then straightening, feeling more astonished than angry. It didn't last; his face closed and he felt cold coil in the pit of his stomach. Melanie looked taken aback, but stubbornly she pressed on, her voice quiet.

“You're acting like a spoiled brat. You were out of line.” She pointed out quietly, half-whispering. The room was dead silent. “I don't care how overwrought you are, I don't want to be called a whore. If you're upset, you're supposed to be old enough to deal with it. Don't take it out on me and my friends.”

Alan tilted his head to the side, still regarding her coldly. “And why should I care if I offend your delicate sensibilities? I hadn't thought you were a timid little mouse, Miss Longbottom.”

Theodore's face tightened; behind him, Blaise grunted quietly.

“Tell me,” He asked carefully, carelessly, “what's stopping me from paying you back for that slap?” Distantly, the cold he was feeling frightened him. He ignored it.

“I am.”

Alan snapped back to attention, the distance fleeing. His eyes flicked up to the door to his bedroom, and Alan turned more fully to face the doorframe. Neville was leaning against the wood, clearly exhausted, his face lined with pain, but he was staring at Alan with intense eyes, and he wasn't the least intimidated by Alan's still cold face.

A smirk twitched across Alan's features. "You're barely standing." He pointed out lightly.

"Oh, I know I couldn't do jack shit to you right now." Neville responded lightly. "However, I also know you wouldn't dare harm me, and I'm reminding you by extension that you shouldn't harm my little sister. Nor her friends. So sheath those fangs and grow up."

"And you don't care that I got you into that situation?"

Neville rolled his eyes. "First, you let me get revenge on Bellatrix so why are you sorry, and second, as Blaise pointed out, none of us are weaklings. We're all the same as you – powerful children. We're stupid, but we're not dumb. We can make our own choices, and if we wanted to choose otherwise, we'd have told you to fuck off and/or sat on you if we thought you needed it. So stop whining about it." Neville turned his head to regard the bed again and sighed. "Can a few of you help me get back to being horizontal before Poppy comes in and castrates me?"

Theodore and Tracey gave strained laughs, and Alan, feeling scolded, walked over to brace Neville as he pushed off the door. Melanie came up on his other side, just tall enough for him to brace against her shoulders. With Alan holding him around the chest, and the crutch of his sister, Neville weakly made his way back to the bed. Alan grunted as he levered him down.

"You weren't anywhere near this bad when we came in; Hell, you were fine when I woke up, or seemed to be."

"Shock, and delayed effects. You think that bitch didn't think of everything?" Neville groused. "And Poppy made a mistake – something of what she did reacted badly with one of the spells and set off a reaction. Not to mention I'm dog ass tired from using a few spells I, well, shouldn't have."

Neville wouldn't look at him, and Alan frowned. "What kinda spells were those?" He didn't get an answer, but Neville glared down at Melanie.

"Mel, go make sure Ginny's okay."

Melanie looked mutinous for a moment, glanced between Alan and Neville, and then stalked out of the room like an angry cat. "I'm coming back, you know, but you can have your few minutes of boy-talk."

Neville rolled his eyes, and Alan smiled wryly, looking down at Harry's 'brother'. Neville still refused to look at him, and Alan finally prompted him, "Well?"

"I didn't really want to talk; I just wanted to make sure Ginny was okay."

Alan rolled his eyes. "Okay, say I believe you. What might I pry out of you in the moments whilst Melanie is away? What dirty little secrets are you hiding? I have very rarely heard of spells taxing someone's strength that badly."

Neville shrugged. "This isn't that, or not just that. Most of it is the bad reaction, part of it is lingering spell damage that was held at bay with adrenaline, but ... I am mildly exhausted, and so the healing is taking longer because my body can't give it any little boost."

"Okay ..." Alan drawled. "That still doesn't answer the question. The number of spells that damn taxing is pretty limited. There's a few innovations, like large scale conjuring, keeping up a spell for a long time, or something all encompassing and violent, like maybe an ... Unforgivable ..." Alan stared long and hard, and Neville's face firmed into a mask. "I presume you didn't mention it?"

"Mention what? You mean that I cast a highly illegal spell that would land me in Azkaban whether I was goaded into it or not?" Neville snorted. "Course I didn't." His tone was mocking. "I only cast several large, overpowered spells like Geoffrey taught me to. I did, actually. I just ... they weren't the only spells I cast. She pissed me off; I tried, failed, and after she goaded me, I tried again and the bitch was shocked as Hell that I didn't fail again. And I shouldn't even be telling you this; damn it all."

Neville was clearly off-centre. He wasn't able to focus on Alan, either through shame or distraction, and was constantly fidgeting. Alan hoped it was just the potions doping him up, and not a spell effect or mental instability. He kicked himself as soon as he thought it – like he himself was a shining column of stability on his own. He's just made the classic mistake of cussing at women in their presence, knowing they'd over- er, react. He wasn't normally that air headed. Quietly, he sat on the edge of the bed, and smiled gently at Neville, nodding once in understanding, and then smiling falsely.

"You enjoy that book full of essays?"

"I never thought of using Acromantula silk for that." Neville returned dryly. "Many fascinating tests. How did he talk the subjects into it?"

"He goaded them into it." Alan returned. "Velorian was one of the subjects, you know. He knows Nicholas Harper."

Neville raised his eyebrow. "Which one was him?"

Alan grinned. "Bungee."

Neville roared with laughter. Melanie poked her head back in and frowned.

"Now what?"

Alan gave her an innocent look. "I didn't do it. He found something amusing to read and is enjoying the part. I'm sure he wouldn't mind telling you all about it."

"Oi!" Neville barked. "I am so not sharing half of those with my little sister!"

"It's alright." Alan smiled. "She thinks the article was about Acromantula silk as viable cloth."

Neville glanced at him, curious. "Is it?"

"Labour intensive getting it clean." Alan smiled. "But stronger than steel and infinitely pliable. However, Nicholas wasn't the least interested in that function."

"I'd say not. He reminds me of Jonas."

Alan smiled enigmatically and left, ignoring Neville calling indignantly after him.

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Alan wandered for the rest of the day, and eventually collapsed into his bed and fell asleep. The next morning, he was awake early, and found on his bedside table a letter addressed to him from Dumbledore. It requested his presence in his office immediately, and Alan had taken five minutes of staring blankly at the wall before he finally gave in and went. He didn't want to talk to the old man, but he had too many questions. Geoffrey was his uncle, but he was careless man at times and uninitiated in the war. Severus was his father, but the connection was almost in name alone – they'd never become close. Harry and Blaise were too young, and, while he probably would have tried Andrew were he awake, Andrew was too young as well. Regulus, his normal confidante ... it was too painful to think of. Dumbledore knew the war, he knew Voldemort, and if anyone could tell him more about the nuances of prophecy, Dumbledore would be the best bet out of all of them.

It didn't mean he rode up the stairs in a good mood, though. When Dumbledore called him through the door, Alan's face was set in a scowl, and Dumbledore noticed immediately. He looked torn, and then straightened. Alan was surprised to see the grandfatherly figure disappear, and an official looking advisor emerge. This Dumbledore could lead a war, could fight. Alan felt a little twinge that he hadn't actually watched him fight – it would probably have been spectacular. However, his focus had remained upon his friends, and getting them out alive. Dumbledore had agreed when they'd passed by each other; curiosity was not something to die for.

"Alan, would you like to sit?"

Alan considered it a moment, but gave in without waiting for his consideration to finish. His face was stony, and no amount of effort relaxed it. Dumbledore waited a moment, and then spoke.

"The few recordings the Ministry have remaining have been reviewed. The atrium, Death Chamber, and the areas directly between were disabled, but in the other rooms, the recordings were unmolested and accurate. Thus, alongside the additional testimony of Velorian Mayfair, the Minister has rescinded his insistence that a false alarm was raised, and the scramble to renege and pick up the flag of warning has begun. The short fight Harry fought against Voldemort amidst the brains was caught, as well as your and Auror Potter's intervention, and the Auror's subsequent fight until it returned to the Death Chamber. Reporters are clamouring to speak with you." Dumbledore watched him over his spectacles, but Alan refused to speak up until asked. "I'm sure you can imagine the confusion we are under, with so few rooms available for reference of what must have been a great battle. Your meeting with Voldemort is shrouded in mystery. The Death Eaters taken alive have little to say; quite a number are dead, and some deaths are unaccounted for. I would ask if you would share your part of the story with me, Alan, as much of what ensued was driven by your actions."

Alan nodded hesitantly. "I do owe you, don't I?" He admitted quietly. It was satisfying to see Dumbledore hide a startled expression; he was unable to change the very curious look that descended upon him. Alan looked away shortly thereafter. He still hated how that had all played out. "In the History OWL, I had a headache. I suspected it was from the fight the night before – two hours sleep on stress is not relaxing. Apparently, however, it also degraded my Occlumency again. Halfway through, Voldemort forced a short image into my mind of Regulus, tortured. He then demanded I meet him in the Department of Mysteries to return his locket in exchange for Regulus' life. I – I couldn't ..." Alan glanced up at Dumbledore again, feeling helplessly conflicted and hating it. "Regulus was ... the person closest to me. Sure, Geoffrey and Ginger helped raise me, but Regulus was ..."

"I understand." Dumbledore reassured him. Alan swallowed and looked away again. Good, he didn't have to bumble through that

again; Dumbledore apparently didn't even understand the struggle – it would have been so much smarter for him to merely ignore the vision, everything was screaming he should have now that it was over, but ... he couldn't leave Regulus.

"I responded – I don't really understand it. I could ... feel the connection he'd forged, could tell he was actively influencing me, and I 'talked' back. We basically agreed, and I pushed him out and tried to seal the hole again."

Dumbledore was watching him curiously. "So you're saying you have layered Occlumency? I believe Americans have labelled it the 'Plane'."

Alan looked at him, confused.

"You're shields give the apparent image that your mind is unprotected, or minimally protected, but between your deepest thoughts and your superficial concerns, is a barrier that is hidden as something innocuous." Dumbledore explained. "I'll presume this invasion was set deeper in your mind?"

Alan didn't want to outright admit it to the Headmaster, but, reluctantly, he nodded. Dumbledore smiled lightly, and leaned back. "Continue, then. I'm sorry; my academic interest was piqued. I'll refrain from interrupting again."

Alan sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "I left the exam – I was doing terrible anyways. Madam Pomfrey gave me a calming draught, and confirmed there were no Order members in the school – McGonagall had been attacked the night before. I tried to get someone using my mirrors, but only Lyall answered. She confirmed everyone was at the Embassy and ..." Alan swore, and stood, furious with himself. Lyall! The stupid, idiotic presumption!

"Alan?"

"I was stupid." Alan forced himself back into the chair. "Lyall could've contacted the Embassy, couldn't she have?"

“Potentially.” Dumbledore allowed. “However, during an active trial, which was what was going on, the defendants and their party are typically rather tied down, and it’s frowned upon if they get up and leave in the middle of it. They possibly would have refused to even hear her out, much less pass the message through.”

Alan waved it off. “I still should have tried. I can’t believe I ignored that.”

Dumbledore picked up one of his figurines, and nodded. “It was an oversight, but Alan. You forgot. And still, despite that, no one on our side has died. It was, despite all odds, a successful venture on your part.”

“You don’t know that. Regulus’ condition is still unknown, and half my friends are still healing.” Alan didn’t want to remind himself that Dumbledore was right, that he’d done his best, and it had worked quite well for what he’d had to work with. He still didn’t like it. “Anyways, after I tried everyone, and got the location from Lyall, I left a message with Adam at Grimmauld, and then went to talk everyone else into coming with me, so I wasn’t going alone. I knew you’d destroyed the locket – you did, right? – so I had to fake it, and I think I did fairly well. I threatened him with a portkey on the string ...” Alan ran his hand over his face again. “I never want to have to bluff like that again.”

“Yes, the locket is destroyed.” Dumbledore smiled. “Thank your father for the venom once more. It was invaluable. Also, I am most impressed with your planning so far, Alan.”

Alan ducked his head, and then considered the next part. He was so not telling him he’d become an animagus. “I got everyone together and sent out the contingencies – the twins, Melanie, and Nanna, since Ginny refused to remain behind, and I could only realistically take so many. Not to mention various parties might throttle me for endangering them. After that, we left.”

“I heard from several people, including your friend, Susan, that your leaving involved a short altercation with Draco.”

Alan shrugged. "It's so common, I didn't feel it was news. We had to stun him, admittedly, and then ran out to the forest, but really. It wasn't surprising."

Dumbledore nodded. "Who all did you end up taking with you?"

Alan paused to think, counting off on his fingers. "Blaise and Luna, Neville, Harry, Ginny ... and Salvador. That's it."

"Salvador Hopkins?" Dumbledore clarified. "I had heard you were friends with him, but was uncertain. His family has a very strict rule, do they not?"

Alan shrugged, nonchalantly. Perhaps the news hadn't found it's way up about Salvador's disownment, or at least not his adoption. "He does, but it hasn't stopped him. A lot of my friends are in similar situations."

"You seem very comfortable with most of them."

Alan finally met his eyes. "I told Blaise when I first was made his dorm-mate, that I would not be a stereotype. I was my own person, and damn the House reputation. If they couldn't take me on the qualities I was judged for, it wasn't my damn problem. Ever since, he's been working to be and remain my friend, on his own qualities." Alan's lips quirked. "Even if he does still tell the house elves to press my clothes, whether I like it or not."

Dumbledore regarded him with hooded eyes, a look that made Alan uncomfortable. He closed his face off, and nodded. "Please, continue."

Unnerved, Alan did so. "Out in the forest, there was a bit of a commotion but it didn't come near us, thank God. But ..." Oh, how to play this ... Mentally apologizing, Alan fabricated slightly. "It seemed to have already come by the place we were at. A deer had been injured, and ran towards the edge before dying. Luna, naturally," Alan's smile was genuine, "pointed it out after a few minutes, and there were thestrals nearby. There were enough to take us, possibly

because of the commotion driving them out. I hope you don't mind." Alan ducked his head.

"Not in the slightest." Dumbledore smiled. "They get little enough exercise, I'm sure it wasn't the least inconvenient for them."

Alan shrugged it off, and continued. "We arrived in good time, the sun still up actually, and easily passed through the visitor's entrance. Or, I did. I went first, because of the possibility of Voldemort insisting upon escorting me. Neville had worked out necklaces for me and Harry, using the protean charm."

"A most advanced spell." Dumbledore murmured. "Truly, Neville is well beyond what could be expected of him, if he could only pull himself back from the edge of depression."

Alan shifted uncomfortably, and sighed. "Anyways, it worked quite well as an alert system, and I went down," Alan looked up and down again, "Using the mage sight spell, just to be cautious." Secrets galore, Alan groused. Can't say half the truth unless I want to give myself away. "There were six Death Eaters in the lobby; two approached and uncloaked themselves. They led me down the elevator, and to the Department of Mysteries. One of the invisible people joined us in the lift – they held onto me through the trip to keep me from running into him, I suspect. As we went down the hall, the lift started up again, and the other three came down as well. I think ..." Alan turned the idea over in his head and looked quietly up at Dumbledore. "I think Voldemort was putting on a show, you know? They hurried me past a point and the sound was cut off."

Dumbledore, noticing his attention, considered the matter for several moments. "I suspect it is very possible, although I cannot yet say for sure. I would not discount the possibility. If you would continue? I will keep it in mind. Perhaps his later behaviour would be more telling."

Alan nodded carefully, and moved on. "The second lift's occupants joined us in that round room, and then we went on into the Death Chamber, the invisible Death Eaters going first as the others delayed me. When I entered, none of them were invisible anymore. There were twelve, including the two who had escorted me in. I didn't make

an effort to recognize any of them. They were arrayed around the walls, mostly by the doors and Voldemort was in the middle, down at the bottom, sitting on a conjured throne by the veil. Regulus was just off to the side, still on the dais, held by a Death Eater. I was escorted down, and then he was told to stand at the bottom of the stairs. And, well, we talked.” Alan awkwardly finished.

Dumbledore’s eyes weren’t twinkling, but he sound amused when he prompted, “What about?”

Alan shot him a dirty look. “Not much. He mentioned his appreciation of the Department of Mysteries and showed off the veil. I got drawn in by it, and only stopped when he put his foot on my chest – did you know he wears black silk slippers? They look ridiculous.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed? I myself enjoy wearing silk slippers, although black is not one of my preferred colours. However, I more enjoy socks, or shoes with buckles.”

Alan just eyed him warily. “Still, the … conversation.” Alan took a deep breath. “After he showed me the veil, he asked if I knew what was in the Department of Mysteries. I didn’t; I honestly never knew the place existed, so why would I wonder about it? He produced a glass sphere; he’d been playing with it when I came in.” Alan watched, and felt his chest tighten as Dumbledore’s face went cold. “You know what it was, don’t you? You know.”

Dumbledore lowered his head. “I believe I do. Did you …”

“He broke it. He put up a ward and broke it. You know the whole prophecy, don’t you, and you must’ve known for some time. More than just what my father knew.” Alan asked, keeping his anger out of his voice. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you never mention the whole of it, to me, or to Harry or Neville? We all fit the criteria, you know.” Alan asked. “Why never mention it? Why never bring it up with me, when you learned so much

more about it, when it was clear I considered myself a match to it? I presume you would have corrected me if I was wrong?"

"I thought you somehow knew." Dumbledore hedged.

"It's not hard to guess what it means." Alan snapped, "I never even thought there was more to it. I thought I knew it all; foolishly, but I thought it."

Dumbledore adjusted his glasses and looked up again. "What prophecy did you hear, to ensure they are the same?"

Alan thought back to it, and struggled to put the words together. Fortunately, the words had a flow to them. He'd been dwelling on them, honestly. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.' I think it repeats itself somewhat again, but that's it. Is it the one?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I must ask, what was his reaction?"

Alan shrugged awkwardly, remembering. "Shock. He was startled, a little scared I presume, but then again I was scared shitless at the moment, and convinced he was going to fly off the handle. I was as surprised as you are that he took it so well. He was ... impressed, I think. He ... he started talking about my strengths. Asked me to join him again." Alan looked up, suspicious now. "He said I reminded him of himself. The 'perfect Slytherin.' You called me that yourself once."

"I will admit you and Tom Riddle are very nearly two of a kind, Alan." Dumbledore answered. "You are charismatic, powerful, a natural leader capable of invoking devotion in a group, creating loyalty with little overt reward and promises of greatness. Even in looks, you are alike – tall, strong, dark haired and eyed, handsome. It was a great concern of mine, I will admit."

"Is that only because you're afraid of me hating you?" Alan spat. "Scared honest?"

"In part, yes." Dumbledore met his gaze without flinching, and Alan reigned in his anger again. "You and Harry both distrust me, I know, as does Neville. You three are some of my strongest students. Harry and Neville's parents trust me implicitly, and you, as children, do not. It is most disconcerting, as all three of you also have powerful Occlumency shields. I cannot even gain access to Neville's superficial thoughts, unlike you and Harry, not unless I wished to break his shields and what little trust he has in me with them. Naturally, I am mildly afraid if you might choose the path Voldemort walked, because you will take a large number of powerful, intelligent people with you, possibly including your only equal year mate, Harry, and through him, far more. You ask if I am scared of you?" Dumbledore folded his hands on his desk, watching him, speaking as though he was an equal, not a child, and also, as though he were as dangerous as he kept calling him, as much as Dumbledore would ever consider someone dangerous. "In a way I am. Although I know my knowledge exceeds yours, and by sheer power we are equal, you have a frightening potential still vulnerable to impression, despite your most admirable upbringing instilling such self-confidence, self-reliance, and maturity. However, that upbringing also leads me to know that if I try and hold onto you, you will only cut yourself off."

"I am not a weapon, to be used at your convenience." Alan growled.

"Precisely." Dumbledore nodded, smiling. The incongruity defused him again. "And it is a relief to be able to speak to you frankly, even as I mourn that you cannot simply enjoy your life."

Alan knitted his brow and frowned at Dumbledore. The man was a walking conundrum. Admittedly, he was handling this very well, and Alan couldn't find reason or grounds to throw away anything he was saying. He was manipulating him with the most unlikely combination of frankness and truth, and while Alan appreciated it, he couldn't help but feel manipulated anyways. He'd have to work it over again sometime, but for now ... for now, he could trust him. He needed to, because no matter what Dumbledore said, Alan was still young and he needed an adult right now.

"So what does the prophecy mean, beyond the obvious?" Alan asked.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, and the smile left, his features blanking into no reaction. "The prophecy. I'm sure you understand the nebulous nature of such things? How they may or may not be true, or have merit." Alan nodded impatiently. "Well, if we pass that and believe it true, then it states the identifying characteristics of a child who will become the one with the power to destroy Voldemort."

"I presume the mark is what made it clear which of us was the one?" Alan asked carefully. "I'd thought so from what I knew previously, even without that line." Alan smirked. "As I said to Voldemort, the rest of the prophecy wasn't exactly surprising."

"No, it is not." Dumbledore smiled. "But it is still important. Yes, the mark sets you apart from Neville and Harry. When is your birthday?"

"Sometime after midnight, Aug first. Regulus had it memorized, that it was midnight."

"A very fine line, indeed. Your mother, Amber?"

"Threw acid in the face of one Tom Marvolo Riddle who kept proposing they 'continue Salazar's noble line'. She had no intention of having a child, much less with a self-deluded monster, if Regulus remembered her words correctly." Alan shrugged. "And no, I have no clue about Severus', or why they even had me."

Dumbledore took his glasses off to clean them, and put them back on before continuing. "I knew the mark as soon as I saw it this Christmas, when you came in with news about Arthur Weasley, but it was masked with magic. Do you purposefully hide it?"

"No." Alan admitted quietly. He wasn't sure if he wanted to ... "It ... My eye is ... actually blind." Alan said quietly. Dumbledore immediately fixed him with an intent stare. "My magic compensates without conscious direction. It hides the mark, restores my sight ..." Alan looked up and then down, and then quickly admitted, "The excess magic allows me to sort of see magic, too. It looks like a heat haze when there are spells about. I ... I didn't use a magic seeing spell when I saw the invisible Death Eaters in the atrium. But

sometimes it doesn't work, because I can't see any haze when Harry uses his invisibility cloak, although for most others I can."

Dumbledore straightened his glasses and nodded slowly. "Harry's cloak is a unique item. I am not surprised you cannot see the magic in it. As for the reaction, it is most curious. I presume the Alfaerus have also expressed a similar interest?"

Alan grimaced. "If you want to test it, ask the Alfaerus for their papers on it first before you start asking permission. I have better things to do than play guinea pig when most everything's already been tried."

"Naturally. And despite the interest, that is not the topic this evening, even if it is a most fascinating magical phenomenon. I don't suppose I need to tell you that the mark is also a connection between you and Voldemort?" Alan shook his head, remembering painfully the invasion he'd suffered. No, it didn't need brought up at all. "I thought not, as you seem to have experienced that. Without Occlumency, you would be far weaker, and very vulnerable."

Alan rubbed his forehead. "Would you cut to the chase already? I've about had it with your blathering."

"Very well." Dumbledore sat back carefully in his chair and regarded Alan with narrowed eyes. "I'm sure you already know the only thing I can tell you. It's in the last part of the prophecy, the one I'm sure both you and Voldemort were entranced by."

Alan glared up at him. He was hoping he'd misheard, but apparently Dumbledore wasn't going to bring some far-fetched misinterpretation out of his ass. "So it's me, or him. One of us is going to die."

"More specific even than that, Alan." Dumbledore gently scolded.

Alan rubbed his eye. "I don't get it."

"Not only do the two of you need die, it must be at the hand of the other. You must kill Voldemort, and he must kill you."

Alan turned aside and stood up abruptly. “I don’t want to have to kill, but I’m not going to die. I’ll kill him easy enough, but if that’s all you have to say ...” Alan left it open, clearly goading the teacher into saying more.

Dumbledore didn’t take it. He’d looked down at his desk, sadly regarding the woodwork, and then nodding slowly. “That is all, Alan. If you like, Harry is awake now. He would probably enjoy speaking to you.”

Alan blinked at the consideration. “Thank you. I will. And ... thank you.” Awkwardly, Alan waited to see if Dumbledore would acknowledge it, but after a minute of him almost determinedly focusing on something else, Alan turned and left back down the winding steps, unsure about his choices and frustrated with the future.

A/N: The last chapter of fifth year! Alan and Dumbledore finally outright just talk, and the butcher's bill of the fight. So, do you lovely people want the next chapter in a week, or two? Hm, which should it be? I'd love to hear what you think, about that and the story! Any thoughts on the story are welcome.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-seven

Harry grimaced as he stumbled to the ground in the wake of the portkey. He didn't know if it was lack of practice, or just bad luck but it certainly wasn't the impression he wanted for arriving at Salem. Beside him, Nanna swore as she stumbled against James in her own landing.

Harry quickly scrambled to his feet, smiled at his mother before he whipped his head around at the sound of two excited screams.

"Alan! Good God, man, you've been gone two years! Are you taller than our dad, you goose?"

Alan had stepped out of the circle the two portkeys had landed in, and moved to catch the two shorter black-haired boys who'd immediately jumped him.

"Like you rascals actually missed me! What's been going on, who's all here?"

Harry moved over to listen, avoiding his father's gaze. If he looked up, James would only quickly glance away, denying that he'd done so. His father had avoided talking to him since school had let out, after reassuring himself that Harry was all right from the jaunt he'd taken into the Department of Mysteries. Similarly, Harry had avoided him, particularly after they'd all returned to Grimmauld place, after James had seen the many times Alan had visited while Poppy fussed. He was still uncomfortable with their friendship. Even Severus had accepted it, Sirius had, but not James. Not yet. And Harry didn't want to worry about it while they were here.

Turning back to Alan, the twins had apparently been talking a mile a minute, and another boy had stepped near, brown-haired with a ponytail and with what looked like his little brother standing in his shadow. Suddenly, one twin pushed the other and snapped,

"Liar! That's not what happened! Finnian swore Jannicke cheated!"

"Jannicke beats everybody, Finn was just fussing and you know it!"

“Finn always wins!”

“Jannicke whooped Velorian, and he’s older than her!”

“You just have a crush!”

“Not so!”

Alan had stepped back as soon as they’d started in on each other, and he looked over at Harry, finding him looking attentively on. He smiled.

“Ahh, twins. You know, I like these two better than the Weasleys. They couldn’t plot anything together, they argue so much.”

“They argue more often than they change their socks.” A girl commented.

Harry glanced over at her: she was a brunette about Nanna’s age. The argument immediately stopped and the boys turned on her at once.

“We do not!” One insisted.

“You mean you change your socks that often?” The pony-tailed boy commented, apparently astonished.

The twins pointedly kept their mouths shut, and Alan laughed quietly before addressing Harry.

“The twins are Eli and Luce; their sister,” the brown haired girl curtseyed slightly upon her designation, “Fancy,”

“Jasmine!” She snapped. “My name is Jasmine!”

“Middle name,” Alan shrugged it off.

“I don’t care! Call me Jasmine!”

"Fine, Jasmine," Alan gave an exaggerated bow her direction. Harry heard Neville, behind him, snort and walk over. Alan gave him a pointed smile as well, and then waved at the boy in the ponytail, "And there's Cenhelm and Chayim, called Cham." Alan blinked at him. "Baldur let go of you?"

Cenhelm – Harry couldn't help but blink at the strange name – shrugged. "He's got mother. She's all goo-goo-eyed over little Riley."

Alan's face brightened into a smile. "How is little Riley?"

Neville sighed, and leaned over to Harry, "Ahh, to be so confused."

Jasmine snorted nearby and both of them jumped, unaware she'd drawn near.

"Don't feel bad." She sighed. "Trust me, confusion is perfectly normal. I still get confused on occasion, what with Maeve pregnant and still nursing, and now Ginger having another child too. I'm just glad Grace was the last mother wanted, else she might have competed with Mellisande and Ginger, and that's just a scary thought."

Neville blinked. "I know Ginger has ten kids, but ... Mellisande?"

"Cenhelm and Cham's mother. She's got ... eight kids, and is apparently happy."

"Eight?"

Jasmine nodded. "I've got five uncles and one aunt, so it's kinda in the family."

Harry wondered if he'd offend her, but decided to ask anyways, "Why'd Alan first call you Fancy?"

Jasmine grimaced. "My full name is Fancy Jasmine Fir. Same as Eli is Eli Mallen Fir, and Luce is Luce Peter Fir. Damn kid got the only normal name. Our oldest brother is Finnian Ignatius Fir, my younger brother is Andrew Pyrrhus Fir, and the youngest is Gaia Grace Fir."

Jasmine made a face. "Weird as Hell names. Rest of the family is little better."

Neville blinked. "Ginger's seem fine."

"Ginger's have three middle names each." Jasmine drawled, and then suddenly stepped forward. "Hey, I resent that remark!"

"That's because you're a girl!" Luce spat. He was wearing a red shirt to Eli's blue – it was the only way Harry could tell them apart. "Eligia's always favoured girls!"

"And you're only saying that because Eligia is currently in Hawaii along with Jannicke." Cenhelm shot. "Otherwise you'd have bitten your tongue first. She'd have you doing lines even if it was summer break."

Luce gaped at him. "I'm not stupid!"

Jasmine looked ready to bite him again, so Harry quickly inserted, "Who's Eligia, and why's she in Hawaii?"

Jasmine closed her mouth, and Eli gratefully answered, "One of our aunt's. She's on another fun trip with her husband; she took Jannicke, Hera, and Sevmire both to let them surf and to have more eyes on her kids."

"And of course, Jannicke wouldn't go anywhere without Hera, and Sevmire follows Jannicke like a puppy." Cenhelm pointed out with a smile. Neville made a questioning noise, and Alan laughed.

"Sevmire's so blond his brain's bleached. He can't quite figure out why Jannicke and Hera always seem to get stuck in a hotel room with one bed."

Harry suppressed his desire to grin and pointed out calmly, "Why would they have a problem with that? It's alright to share with a friend."

Luce chuckled. "Well, they're not just that kind of friend and Sevmire's just thick."

"I've never had a problem sharing a bed with anyone."

Harry didn't need to look to recognize that voice. Alan turned immediately to share a high-five with the tall, blond vampire, a grin on his face. Eli, behind them snorted.

"Not everybody's willing to share a bed, Andrew."

Andrew took Alan's shoulder to turn him around; Alan merely frowned at him, but let him do so, and then drape his arm over Alan's shoulders – Alan was, in fact, at least an inch taller than him. Andrew gave Eli a lecherous grin as he answered. "I'd share with anybody. I'm good about that, you know."

Harry snorted. "You'd even share a bed Draco Malfoy?"

"Even him." Andrew winked at him. "He might even like it."

Harry blinked several times. The other kids were all quite silent, and Neville finally commented. "Okay, I'll call that a vampire peculiarity and move on. Hey, uncle James! What's the game plan?"

Harry turned his attention back to the group he'd come with and found his parents and Sirius talking with a black-haired man with a crooked smile. Harry could tell at a glance he was definitely in the upper class of Salem simply by the way he held himself. It was disturbingly reminiscent of Malfoy, so Harry quickly made a questioning noise to try and get a name to wash the thought away. Alan heard and nodded that direction.

"Fenris Alfaerus, Geoffrey's oldest brother. Cenhelm and Cham's father."

Cenhelm and Cham were nodding, and Cham suddenly shoved his brother, laughed and ran over to the adults, Cenhelm chasing him with a smile. Everyone else followed in time, wandering over with

amusement. Harry stayed near Alan and Andrew as they did so, listening as they finally got close enough.

"It really is good of you to come, despite the situation I know you're dealing with. I believe you said the government finally woke up?" Fenris added dryly. His voice was deep, full, and confident, fitting with his languid smile.

"Well, with the monitors in the ministry catching me duelling with the Dark Lord in question, I'd say they had little choice but to agree. Governments get nervous when their stronghold gets infiltrated." James grinned. "I'm just not too happy that our children got involved in clearing that out."

"If Alan was leading them, as Geoffrey said, it was probably as safe as any student venture could be." Fenris shrugged. "He's very cautious." Fenris' grin widened again. "And he's also learned nearly every possible way something could go wrong, so he's got a good idea of what to watch for."

"Um," Sirius put in, "is that such a rousing endorsement for your school?"

Fenris blinked and rocked back on his heels. "Probably not, no." Cenhelm and Cham, standing nearby just started chuckling. When Fenris looked down and found them there, he smiled. It took him from looking like a Malfoy to a far friendlier appearance. "Ah, you rascals finished your little gathering and wondering where the explosives are?"

"Dad!" Cenhelm objected. "I do not want to cause trouble!"

"I know." Fenris calmly returned. "You're all for being obedient and proper like I am, but since Alan's here and you're such an important little person you still get to go along and show the Potter kids and Neville around alongside Eli, Luce, and Alan."

"Um, what was that about explosives?" Lily put in quietly.

Fenris' answer was cut off by the door behind them slamming open and two men walking out, one with brilliantly red hair and the other half-a-head taller and dark, carrying a staff the same height as himself. The redhead looked over the group quickly and then smiled tightly before turning to glare at Fenris.

"What was this about trying to keep me in solitary while Alan visits?"

Fenris' face had closed and his lips were tight as he turned to address him. "I think the idea was that you can't take care of yourself and are you cleared with the healers?"

"Fenris, the healers would keep me in a straight jacket if they could."

Fenris muttered out of his mouth, "Not exactly a bad idea," but was spoken over,

"I think I do have a brain inside my head, so you can stop coddling me!" He turned to the man behind him and snapped, "and I don't need an escort, Louie!"

"I don't trust you not to go back down to the labs, thank you." The black-haired man answered stoically. "You've done it before."

"I am –" The man cut himself off with a snap of teeth and turned back to watching Fenris, arms crossed over his chest, tapping his foot impatiently. Fenris gave him a meaninglessly polite smile, and then addressed Alan.

"Alan, can you keep him in line?"

"Sure." Alan answered immediately. "We'll just check out the ground floor and higher and won't go downstairs without Amaranth or Koreol. I'm sure Green's enough of an escort for the upper levels, right?"

Fenris sighed and nodded. "Yeah, sure. At least it'll hopefully make Louis tolerable."

Alan nodded, smiled and told Harry, "We can do the tour now, so make your goodbyes and haul Nanna over, eh?"

Harry, feeling more than a little lost, just nodded and waved to his mother. “Nanna, you want to look around Salem with us?”

Nanna asked something of Lily he couldn’t hear, pecked her on the cheek, and then ran over to join their group. Jasmine immediately darted over to introduce herself and squeal happily about having a girl her age there. Harry sent a longing glance back to the adults, and felt a short pang as James was watching them leave. Harry looked for something else to look at – and then stumbled. He was caught easily, and found himself looking up at a surprisingly familiar face under brilliant red hair.

“You alright, there, Harry?”

It was Green. He had a puckered burn scar on his cheek, and partially down his throat, the skin pink and healing. His hair, which Harry last remembered as blonde, was unnaturally red – redder than a Weasley. He didn’t catch on that he’d been spoken to until Green repeated himself and Harry finally shook himself off and answered. “Yeah, yeah. Fine. Um, what ...”

Green’s face tightened angrily, and then he stopped to run his fingers through his hair and sigh. “I blew up another potion. The Healer-nazis don’t let me out of their sight until they’re satisfied I’m in one piece after a mess like that. Meddlesome bints.”

“Green, stop whining.” Alan ordered, and then turned around and frowned, “Did you have to get Louie back again?”

Green huffed. “Yes, I needed his help again. Why else do you think he’s here?”

“Doesn’t that mean Ravier’s in too?” Cham asked timidly. Cenholm easily put his hand on his brother’s head and just smiled at him. Cham looked a little less nervous.

“I don’t know if he hauled his drill-sergeant girlfriend with him, no.” Green shrugged. “She hasn’t come my way, but since I got put in solitary again ...”

Harry blinked, and Neville quietly asked, “What’s with the solitary? Solitary confinement?”

“It means Green’s obsessing over another experiment, but since it effectively killed him enough he needed a necromancer, the healers aren’t trusting him anywhere near any ingredients, even under the supervision of the classic labs.” Alan explained. “Green’s unstable that way. Now then, is Lyall in?”

“Does Lyall have anywhere else to be?” Green groused, but he was smiling softly as he watched Alan smile. “Of course she’s in. Right in the entrance hall, you know?”

“Cool.” Alan smiled and beckoned Harry forward. “C’mon, I wanna show you all of Salem!”

“What on earth did you get on, Alan?” Neville asked bluntly. “You’re acting like you’ve got a jumping bean up your arse.”

“Do not.” Alan returned. “And I don’t have to keep Blaise and father thinking I’m respectable right now. Even Slytherins cut loose once in a while, Nev.”

Neville’s face blanched, and Harry swatted Alan’s shoulder. “Don’t call him that, or I’ll start calling you Al.”

Alan froze, and Eli and Luce grinned. “Al, eh?”

Alan turned a glare on them. “Call me that again and we’ll try a two-on-two duel.”

Eli and Luce shut up, and Harry glanced thoughtfully between them. “Could that go three-way? Who do you pair with?” Alan jerked his finger at Andrew distractedly, and watched Harry.

“Three two-man teams? We’ll have to try that. I’ll presume you pair with Neville, then the twins, then me and Andrew?”

"Later, Alan." Andrew scolded. "I've got deportment lessons or something this evening."

"Deportment?" Harry asked, curiously. "I hadn't thought Americans bothered with that." He teased.

Andrew shrugged. "It's Koreol. He says I learn it, and I don't question him. So c'mon, before I have to leave, eh? It's a big school, you know."

Alan shook Andrew off and grabbed Harry's arm. "C'mon, then." Harry laughed and let him pull him through the doors, coming into the front room and waving happily at the front desk. "Lyall! I'm back!"

"Alan, darling!" Lyall beamed, a bright, blonde woman with short hair in a pressed trouser suit wearing a fang through one ear that clashed with her otherwise professional mien. "It's been so dull without you, what with Green blowing something up every other month, and the girls just popping out babies left, right, and centre, and all the wolves are jerks – I am so lonely for company with you lost to me, my child!" She enveloped Alan in a hug and winked at Harry as Alan struggled to get free from her grasp – she was surprisingly the same height as Alan, and apparently very strong. If Harry remembered correctly...

"Ma'am, um," Harry wasn't sure if she'd be offended or not. He wouldn't even consider asking back home, so he let his question dwindle unsaid, even as his eyes were curious.

Lyall noticed, and let go of Alan to lean down curiously. This, more than anything got Harry back on track – he was so tired of being short, although he was hopeful that he might be growing again. "What is it you're wondering, hmm?"

"Lyall, Harry's not a child." Alan pointed out, amused. Lyall glanced up at him and Harry saw that wink too.

"I know, pup, but really. He's so adorable." She moved to ruffle his hair, and Harry immediately ducked aside. Of all the insults ... "Oh, fine. What were you wondering, sir?"

Harry just shook his head, casting about for something else. "It was nothing, really. Alan, was there really a ... bone, on that dark guy's staff?" There'd been something semicircular and white hanging from a chain around the top, and it looked something like a bone he'd seen before, with maybe

"It's a mandible on a stick." Green dryly answered. "So, yes. That was bone. It's his necromancer's rod, and made of iron. The mandible you don't ask about, but it's there. Got all its teeth, too. Now the other thing you don't ask about is why there's a pink flower carved beneath the three-pronged top."

Harry blinked several times and decided he should really watch what he asked, because the answers were apparently possibly disturbing. Alan quickly bowed out from Lyall and then grandly indicated the nearby hallway. Harry grinned at him.

"Is there something scary down there?"

"Depends on if Prof. Jernigan's down there or not." Eli put in.

"Scary teacher?" Neville laughed.

"Naw, Prof. Jernigan's pretty nice, but if he's not down there, lady Cruella will be."

"Arithmancy teacher for the Sorcerer's School." Alan put in. "And it's a guy. Stop mocking him." Alan glared, but it wasn't very strong. Eli and Luce were certainly unaffected by it.

"We're not mocking him; he insists we call him a lady and while that's alright, he's always a jerk about it." Eli finished.

"He's convinced we're gonna hate him for wanting to be a woman." Luce added. "I know I don't, but ... whatever. He was raised religious, and that always leads to problems even when you're straight."

Alan blinked. "When ..."

"Three years ago." Eli and Luce answered together.

Alan just shook his head. “And I thought this place couldn’t get weirder ...”

Harry just watched the byplay with a vague sense of amusement; beside him, Neville sighed.

“Swell. Even our guide is lost.”

“Well,” Harry offered, “just don’t lose sight of them and we’ll at least walk out of here I suppose ...”

“Right.” Neville agreed. “And remembering all this?”

Harry smiled wryly at him. “Yeah, right.”

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The tour was relatively pointless, although it certainly proved Salem to be almost as large as Hogwarts with far less character – and less secrets. It certainly made for much easier navigation, but Harry still preferred Hogwarts. It just had such an ambience... The only ambience here was the prevalent security measures capable of closing off rooms, hallways and entire floors. From what Harry remembered Alan relating to him about living here, those probably got a lot of use.

The upper floors of Salem were mainly classrooms, offices, and one whole floor of library; the basements were holding cells for werewolves during the full moon followed by the Potions labs. They did run into Amaranth and explore, but they didn’t get to enter Green’s personal one. Something about his experience had done something, they didn’t know what, and it hadn’t been reversed yet, much to his irritation. Harry got the impression the rest of the staff wasn’t trying very hard, at least not yet. The walk back up was spent mostly listening to the brothers argue and Alan letting him peek into the werewolves rooms. It was most amusing to see them decked out in colourful pillows with a platter and large ceramic water bowl on the floor that read ‘SPOT’. Harry was assured each bowl read something different, such as ‘FLUFFY’ and ‘LADY’.

The school was large enough that by the time they finished they were quite hungry and ready for supper. Rather than the cafeteria they'd toured, however, they left the main building to another official looking building nearby, on the third floor around the back, where a large balcony was set with several round tables. Their parents were there, alongside a mildly pouting Snape and several people Harry did not know. Either way, though, he grinned upon seeing Sirius and Lily talking with Regulus Black, up and about and looking quite a lot better than when Harry had last seen him. The Alfaerus children separated to greet their parents, and Harry went over to Lily and Sirius; James was deep in conversation elsewhere with Fenris. Harry's arrival was greeted with a brilliant smile from his mother and a laugh from Sirius.

"Hey pup, what did you think of the place?" Regulus asked warmly.

"It's big and rather intimidating." Harry offered. "But I like Hogwarts better. It's got more ambience."

Regulus nodded. "Well, the factor of a large medieval castle is a bit of a tall order. We're kinda lacking those in America. The security is also necessary."

Harry grinned. "Alan's told me enough to guess that it gets a lot of use."

"Not a lot." Regulus frowned, and then coughed lightly. "Just ... often enough."

Sirius shook his head. "Do they have any concept of safety around here?"

"Course we do." Harry turned to watch Lyall stalk over, smiling. "Otherwise this wouldn't be a school but a large hole in the ground. I blame the Alfaerus; insanity is hereditary."

"Gee, I thought that it was only in the Brits." Regulus deadpanned.

Lyall winked. "Ahh, but most Americans are initially British, didn't you know?"

Sirius chuckled. “There is that. Any clue where the Alfaerus hail from? Any line?”

“Not the foggiest.” Lyall answered warmly. “Although they smell vaguely Scottish, I think, though I may be getting confused simply because of that ‘Fae’ in their name.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, and Sirius looked curious. “Smell?”

“Werewolf.” Lyall answered easily. Harry corrected himself; apparently there wasn’t much stigma here about that (although why he hadn’t guessed after the food bowls...), but he still was glad he hadn’t asked. “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time when I was sixteen and someone had an experiment going.” She winked. “With too little security.”

Sirius blinked. “Oh.”

Lyall grinned. “Yeah, ‘oh’. Dinner should be starting soon, so ickle Harry might want to sit with Alan and co. Or you could sit at the main table, but it’s your choice. I think Jasmine isn’t giving Nanna a choice over there.”

Harry looked and found all the kids seated together, gathered around one of the round tables next to the one where James was seated with Fenris, two auburn-haired men who both looked remarkably like Geoffrey, and Green and Amaranth, with seats left over presumably for the others. Harry slipped away from his mother and sat between Alan and Neville. Jasmine and Nanna were talking on the other side of the table. Alan smiled at him.

“So, has anything of what I’ve talked about stuck in that head of yours?”

“I could potentially find my way around the school,” Harry allowed, “but otherwise, no, not really.”

“Do you even remember names?” Eli asked, impatiently tapping his plate as he waited for the meal to start.

Harry grinned. "Yes, Eli." The twin frowned, and picked at his shirt, and Harry quickly pointed around the table, "Jasmine's talking with Nanna, Cenhelm is closer to our age than Cham, and since you're one half, the other is Luce. I—" Harry blinked, and then fought the desire to swear as two girls ran over screaming happily to bounce next to Nanna. Harry sighed. "Aren't those Andi and Doe?"

Alan grinned and nodded. "Yep, Geoffrey's oldest daughters. If they're here, that means it's likely we'll be joined by Adam, Baldur and Ean, too."

Harry looked at him a moment, and Eli answered, "Adam's Andi and Doe's younger brother, Baldur is Cenhelm and Cham's younger brother, and Ean is Tighearnach – Raleigh's oldest kid."

Harry just shook his head hopelessly. "I am surrounded by insanity. Help."

"And Alan hasn't even touched on the vampire information." Andrew grinned.

Harry thumped his head against the table, and then choked when Alan pulled him up to allow a tray to float onto the empty space in the middle. Alan nodded shortly to the two elves; Eli and Luce both shouted, "Grace!" and dug in. Harry glanced around to see everyone getting to work on it, and sighed and moved to help himself. Not five minutes later, the door to the inside was knocked open and three boys raced out, black-haired, blonde, and auburn, all roughly the same age. The three seats empty between Doe and Cham were quickly taken over; the two Harry didn't recognize went immediately for the food, but Adam, who Harry had met once before, smiled up at him and nodded before digging in. Neville sighed and rolled his eyes, while Harry turned to Alan.

"Which one's which?"

"Baldwyn is black haired, Tighearnach is red. His father is sitting over there next to Geoffrey." Alan indicated the table, and Harry looked but still couldn't see any difference.

"Which one's Geoffrey?" Harry asked, annoyed. "They look alike."

Alan glanced over. "Oh. I hadn't realized Ray had tied his hair back. Normally it's loose; I think Ray's the one next to your dad, and Geoffrey's talking with Severus."

Tighearnach looked up and swallowed visibly before speaking. "My mother made dad tie his hair back. She said it got in the way of kissing. Why'd you introduce me with that mouthful anyways? I prefer Ean."

"Tighearnach is far more entertaining, though." Alan grinned.

"My middle name is Tiernan." Neville offered quietly. "Although it's anglicized."

Ean frowned. "Mine ain't. I can barely spell it, and the teachers are all ridiculous about it."

"It's TEER-nakh, right?" Harry tried. Ean looked at him, grimaced, and then nodded.

"Yeah. But it's got this -g-h-e-a-r- in the middle for some bizarre reason."

Neville nodded slowly. "That's an Irish name for you."

Ean stuck out his tongue before moving back to his food. Harry snickered softly, and then changed to the black-haired boy. "I'll presume Baldwyn goes by Baldur?"

"Yep." Alan nodded. "It's kinda crazy trying to keep track of all of them. How about I see if I can't talk Geoffrey and your dad and godfather into a mock-fight after supper? Fenris might even join in."

Harry grinned at him. "Sounds great."

It was surprisingly easy to incite the mock duel between James, Sirius, and Geoffrey; Fenris more than happily joined alongside Velorian and a few others. The crowd that gathered was huge. Lily gravitated straight to Ginger and Mellisande to coo over the few-month-old Riley and the other small children. A second blonde woman joined them, a baby in her arms and a small toddler in an older child's arms. Harry was sitting on the far side with the kids he'd already met, joined by Lyall, Koreol, and Regulus. A young adult as tall as Alan with dark brown hair walked in partway through and managed to lose, with much swearing, against Sirius and James. Eli and Luce alternated between jeers and encouragement – apparently it was their older brother, Finnian.

The kids didn't get any chance to join in. By the time James and Sirius were thoroughly and happily bushed, it was late and everybody was shooed into their rooms. Harry was almost surprised to find that the building with the balcony was effectively the Alfaerus' home, or at least their guest rooms. Alan had a room to himself on the fourth floor, right across from Andrew. Apparently the same floor was the guest area; Harry got a room next door to Alan's, followed by Nanna, his parents, then Sirius. However, upon retiring to bed, Harry wandered into Alan's to chat. He found Alan sitting across from Regulus, apparently having been talking intently. Alan noticed him immediately and smiled warmly.

"Hey Harry, c'mon in. You're not interrupting anything."

Harry shrugged awkwardly and wandered in, slipping hesitantly onto Alan's bed at the back pillar – it was an impressive four-poster that dominated the room. Harry stared up, and then turned to watch Regulus. "How are you, sir?"

Regulus snorted. "Don't call me sir. And I'm doing as well as can be expected." Harry only gave him a curious look, and he sighed. "Harry, I really don't want to talk about it. Two months ... just about everyone he's got in his employ had a turn at me. Makes what Alan went through a cakewalk. Nightmares, a few scars ..." He laughed hollowly. "The healers are running the gauntlet trying to work on Green and I at the same time. I'm not sure which of us was more critical actually."

Regulus pulled out of his dark expression to look thoughtful, much like the face he'd put on for most of the day. Alan grimaced.

"Tells you something about Green's potions mishaps. He never does anything by half."

Harry also grinned. "Can you imagine him at Hogwarts?"

Alan looked both concerned and intrigued. "He'd certainly make an impression, but I'd be worried about him experimenting and hurting someone. Surely you remember the accident he had? Poison gas?"

Harry winced. "Oh. There is that." He glanced aside and sighed. "Well, I suppose. What are we gonna be up to tomorrow?"

Alan smiled. "I was thinking possibly showing you the Quidditch pitch and/or trying that three-way duel you offered. Then we could go swimming down at the beach, or you could go off on your own. Andrew said he wanted to talk to me about something, so I don't know. Sometimes he's iffy about that and who's around." Alan rolled his eyes. "He's weird like that."

"Definitely." Harry returned, and found himself yawning. Alan playfully pushed his shoulder.

"Go to bed, Harry. The sooner you wake, the sooner we can hang out in the morning."

Harry nodded again, and let himself out, finding his room and falling into bed.

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In the morning, Harry was awoken with someone pounding incessantly on his door. He rolled over and tried to stuff his head under his pillow and the pounding went away. He hadn't really been able to get to sleep, and had read for a few hours after midnight. However, the pounding wasn't gone too long, and someone started knocking again. Harry was ready to ignore that as well, but then the

door swung open. Furious, Harry sat up abruptly in bed and found himself staring at a highly amused Alan.

"Harry, it's ten o'clock. I know the time-zones suck, but I already stopped Nanna from getting you up at nine. Ten is pushing it. C'mon downstairs and get something resembling breakfast before I allow Nanna and Jasmine to enact their diabolical plan upon you. I think it involved squirrels and ..."

Harry rolled out of bed and threw his hands in the air. "Fine! Scat!"

"Ooo, nice ass. You wear those bottoms often?"

Harry turned and flushed as he found Andrew learning in the doorway. "You leave too." Andrew pouted but didn't argue when Alan grabbed him by the ear and hauled him out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Muttering foul deprecations upon little sisters and horny vampires, and wishing he hadn't worn these pyjamas, Harry stalked to the dresser he'd been given and pulled out his clothes for the day.

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"So, do you always sleep in red silk?"

Harry stopped where he was as he stepped into the small kitchen area he'd been shown the morning before. He glared at Andrew and then ignored him as he went to the table in the corner to fish out something for breakfast. Behind him, Neville addressed Andrew.

"How do you know what he was sleeping in?"

"Alan got to wake him up. It's not like I was going to turn down the chance to take a look. I was mildly hoping for nude, but – Ow, Alan what was that for?"

"You're embarrassing Nanna." Alan scolded.

"I'm not that embarrassed." Nanna squeaked. "I have seen him in his pyjamas before."

"Do you people have nothing better than to discuss my sleepwear?" Harry ground out, searching fruitlessly for muffins. "I'll make sure to wear my long johns tomorrow, so you'll have less to talk about."

Andrew sniffed. "But then I'll be denied the nice view. Silk clings so well – Ow, okay, I'll stop. What, are you jealous Alan? Don't worry, I've seen you- Okay, shutting up now." Andrew's voice sounded mildly strained, and shortly thereafter he muttered something Harry didn't catch. Harry just rolled his eyes and took his bowl of cereal over to the table, resigned to only having orange juice extra.

"What are the morning plans, then?" Harry asked lightly.

"Eli and Luce are just waiting on you to get together before we try that three-way duel. Afterwards, we might manage a short Quidditch game. Not all of the kids are that interested, and with it being summer, it's really only the Alfaerus here."

"What, do they all prefer Quodpot?" Neville asked.

"No," Alan chuckled. "It's mostly academics. Those who do play Quidditch also tend to play Quodpot, so it's pretty much even. I've also seen them try to play Quidditch with the Quodpot balls too."

Harry blinked. "Don't those blow up?"

Alan shrugged, smiling. "Makes the game more fun."

Harry just shook his head and dipped out of the conversation before his cereal got soggy. It wasn't very long before he was following Alan and Andrew to the room set aside for duelling, Nanna trailing along behind them and whining about missing Jasmine, Andi, and Doe. The three girls were waiting for her anyways: she ran over to them and they all started squealing again. Harry and Neville just grinned and made their way down to the floor, where Eli and Luce were waiting alongside Fenris and Sirius. Fenris was sending a curious look at the stands when they came down, and when Harry looked he found him

looking at James, who had been staring again. Harry ignored it, and listened intently when Fenris returned to addressing them.

"Right. You wanted a three-way fight, so you have it. Harry and Neville, Eli and Luce, and Andrew and Alan. You can plot your own plans, but the basic rules are nothing that can do permanent damage. We're giving you amulets," He handed out the small circular disks on silk ties, "And you will wear them the whole time. Those have protective spells we're testing for duelling. We've found no serious side affects so far, so I'm comfortable lending you these, but don't try and overpower them. I've been assured you all know how to control the power of your spells, so keep the destructive ones minimal. The amulets will only prevent serious bodily harm. This isn't free reign on trying to hurt each other." Fenris gave them all fierce looks. "You're going for immobilization. This is to avoid collateral damage. If you get hit with a heavy spell, the amulet typically reacts by immobilizing you. One of the quirks we're working on. The counter curse should release, if you find time. Mostly, just use common sense, don't try to hurt anyone, and play to win!"

Sirius cut in. "It's pretty much the typical duel with a few precautions because you're all very strong. And Fenris also has said you can use any spells you know, no limits save those illegal here." Sirius looked conflicted as he watched Harry and Neville. Neither boy had reacted; Harry already knew he wasn't using any of his shady spells. "So there isn't going to be any judging on account of that." Neville snorted quietly. Sirius glanced at him, but said nothing. "On that note, Fenris and I will be out there as referees." He grinned widely. "So I'm expecting you to win, Harry!"

Harry grinned happily back. "I don't know, I've never taken on Eli and Luce." The twins were grinning cautiously, but Harry suspected they were a little iffy about the fight. Andrew and Alan both looked deceptively relaxed; Harry knew his own body was humming with anticipation.

"Alright." Fenris grinned. "Eli, Luce. Go to the far right. Alan, Andrew, far left. Harry, Neville. You will be on the wall over here, about centre. You have five minutes to discuss your tactics with your partner, and then the whistle will blow. The last team with a partner standing wins.

Do you understand?" Harry and Neville both nodded. "If you feel something has gone wrong, call for a timeout and Sirius or I will halt the fight where it stands, and come and check it out. That is only if someone is seriously injured, or the necklaces malfunction or fail. We'll be watching at all times. You are not allowed to target one of us, or use us as a shield." Sirius snickered; Harry just smiled. "Do you have any questions?"

Both Harry and Neville quickly shook their heads and moved down the wall to the midpoint. Both glanced across the arena – it was quite large, twenty by twenty metres, below raised stands. Alan had told him it doubled as a skating rink during the winter if anyone was so inclined. Harry felt it reminded him something of the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries, except on a larger scale.

"Well? What do you think the others will do?" Neville asked.

Harry frowned, fingering his wand. "Probably the typical sword-and-shield. One shields, the other attacks."

"Effective." Neville allowed. "Expected."

"Knowing Alan he'll possibly pull something weird." Harry groused. Neville nodded, and then frowned.

"Fenris said anything goes, right?"

"Yeah." Harry answered. "You got another weird idea?"

"I'm better at shield charms than you, right?"

"Quite." Harry allowed. "Why?"

"I'll presume there's no spells until the whistle, but if I conjure a small shield, duplicate it, and use the protean charm, I could give us both a shield on our arms. Whatever spell I use will show up on yours."

Harry nodded. "But I will barely know if it's there or not, and if you go down so does my shield."

"Possibly. Do you trust me or not?" Neville quickly asked.

"Yeah." Harry couldn't help but grin. "You won't be too tired?"

"I'll stay out of it for a time, but no, not really. Protean charms are hard, but not that hard." Neville frowned. "But I don't know how well they'll hold on a conjured object."

"Either way, though, I fight foremost?" Harry asked.

Neville waved his hand negligently. "Of course. You're strongest. This way, I can also send a few spells and I'm not a sitting duck while I plan something else." Neville frowned again. "Would Andrew have any resistance to spells?"

"Some, maybe." Harry hedged. "They've never explained. Keep an eye on the twins, then, see what they do."

"And if they attack us first?" Neville asked. The whistle sounded, and Neville immediately conjured two, small shields. Harry presumed he knew what he was doing with them so small. Harry stepped forward and watched the other two move as he answered.

"Wing it, then."

Neville snorted, and Harry found he was likely right. Spells came from the right immediately, and Harry batted them away. It was when another spell came from Alan's side that he had to do something more fancy, upping the level of the shield and sitting out the roaring wave of power. Harry swore as a spell slipped past his right, but just as quickly, the spell ricocheted back the way it'd come, and Neville handed him the second shield.

"Metre and some radius." Neville shot, his breath slightly hard.
"Reflecting. Should last a while. Does your arm feel warm?"

Harry slipped the strap on awkwardly and then nodded.

"If it's warm, there's a shield. The warmer it is, the stronger the shield. If it's not warm, that's just a wooden disc. Feel free to renew the spell

yourself; it'll affect mine in reverse." Neville grinned over at him.
"Charge?"

"Whom?" Harry asked, smiling.

Neville glanced up; Eli and Luce were stalking around their right; Alan and Andrew were simply looking on with unholy amusement. Harry suspected they were planning when to turn on the twins. Grinning, Harry eyed Neville as he thought, and then asked,

"Don't you think you can take the twins yourself?"

Neville blinked, not taking his eyes off them. Abruptly, he turned, putting his back against Harry's. Harry found himself taking on Alan and Andrew's surprisingly weak attacks. He was about to ask when he suddenly had to brace himself against Neville's sudden blast, skidding him across the floor. The twins shrieked; Harry swore, and spat,

"What the Hell was that, Neville?"

"Um, I found it in one of the notebooks your dad had." He sounded quite dumbstruck. "I didn't think it would do that. They look okay ..."

"Did you just throw them into the wall?" Harry queried, but he noticed Alan and Andrew were just as shocked; Andrew was bent over laughing. Harry grinned. "What was that spell?"

Neville turned and grinned. "Brace me again and we'll test their reflexes too. The twins are stunned for now."

Harry gleefully did so, standing behind Neville who again silently used the spell. Alan shielded; Andrew was taken off guard. Harry turned to see the twins shaking off the spell, and Harry pursed his lips a moment.

"Hey, Neville, do you know the Animagus laws here in America?"

"Do you want to try and hit a small dark kneazle against grey stone, Harry?"

Harry blinked. "No. Only if he goes first then. Alan, or the twins?"

"Provided we can have a defence against interference, the twins. Alan needs to tire."

Harry nodded, and turned and sprinted to the twins, Neville right behind them. A soft, "Right!" and he slipped aside, letting Alan's spell fly past and straight into Luce, who was just getting up. A second spell from Harry knocked Eli askance, but he kept his feet and returned fire. It didn't hit either, but Neville grunted. A flare on his arm made him assume the shield had taken it, so Harry kept going. Once behind Eli, he grinned, and quickly cast a banishing spell, overpowering it on purpose. A spell from Neville went ahead and Harry felt much better; Eli landed ten feet back on a weak cushioning charm, grunting hard and clearly winded, but otherwise unhurt. Alan gave a salute that turned into an intricate motion culminating in a hazy dog that took a moment to solidify and run across the room. Neville quickly turned and stunned Luce, following up with Eli. Harry blinked; he'd forgotten they were a team and now out of the picture.

The hazy dog was nearing, and Harry cast a banishing charm it's direction. The spell shredded the dog, and Harry frowned before nodding at Neville and pointing to the side. Neville nodded, and started strolling that direction. Trusting Neville to have a plan for himself, Harry jogged off in his own. Alan and Andrew were standing and waiting, side by side, Andrew looking a little put-out, presumably from his little flight. As Harry went, he glanced at Neville who had started jogging himself. When he looked back up, Harry listed cusses in his head before he fell to the spell he'd just run into. His limbs locked, and he landed and winded himself.

Great. Petrificus Totalus.

'I'm feeling really smart right now.'

Harry tried to remember if he'd been instructed in how to break these things. It wasn't coming to him. He was stuck, staring at the ceiling, and only able to hear grunts, pants, and footsteps alongside a few cheers he hadn't been noticing while focusing on the duel. They

weren't very intelligible, and only made him more irritable as he lay and waited for the spell to go away. Abruptly, someone tripped over him and he heard Alan swear. Harry could just glimpse him at the edge of his vision. Cheekily, Alan patted him on the head.

"You've got one Hell of a brother, Harry."

The swear words Harry wished he could say would have made his dad blush.

Alan glanced up again and Harry saw his shield flare into view, brilliant orange. Alan swore again, and jerked upright, leaving Harry behind. Someone else jumped over him, with ease that made Harry guess Andrew and abruptly he was free again.

"Get up and get your ass in gear, Harry!"

Harry didn't waste his breath thanking Neville and scrambled to his feet and after Neville where he was focused on Alan and Andrew. Harry quickly realized that, while Neville was missing his shield, Harry's was still warm, and apparently stronger than it had been before. The other one must have been destroyed; Harry didn't know enough about the protean charm to guess why it was stronger, but it was working and deflected Andrew's spell easily enough. Harry retaliated irritably with the fire whip, remembering a moment later it was borderline illegal. It grabbed onto Andrew and his shield immediately, and Andrew swore explosively. Wanting the two separate, Harry jerked on the whip. What he didn't expect was for it to increase the pull enough to throw Andrew across the arena! Neville also swore.

"Good bloody thing that was Andrew, Harry!"

Harry winced again, releasing the spell as Andrew impacted the wall with a heavy thud. Fenris was right next to him, and easily waved Harry back to dealing with Alan; Alan also didn't seem really worried, so Harry relaxed and traded spells again. Alan's next shot dropped Neville to his knees and Harry turned to quickly counter the spell. He didn't see Alan's next spell, but he felt it when his shield shattered.

The stronger the shield, the stronger the backlash when it broke: Harry blacked out when he slammed into the ground.

III

“... Really impressive spells he used, and all of it silent. When on earth did they find the time to memorize that?”

Harry crawled back awake, and blinked as he looked up at blinding white. He groaned and covered his eyes, immediately guessing he was in a hospital wing. A slight brown-haired woman trotted over and smiled warmly at him.

“Awake?” She asked briskly. “You’re fine; no lingering troubles, but we didn’t want to force you awake. You’ve been out only fifteen minutes. The duel finished shortly after you were knocked out. Alan and Andrew won.”

Harry found himself waking up far quicker than he had in his history of being knocked out, and he nodded before asking, “Is Andrew all right?”

The woman snorted. “That’s not the first time he’s been thrown into a wall, and it won’t be the last. He knocked out Neville while Neville was distracted with Alan. The vampire physiology is hard to beat. Now, if he hadn’t had that shield up and you weren’t wearing necklaces, the fire would have caused some serious trouble, but that would have been far more dangerous than a playful duel would have wanted.” Noting Harry’s startled expression, she nodded quickly. “Vampires are highly flammable. We knew that sending you in, so don’t worry. I suppose Alan should have told you, but,” She sighed dramatically, “the sheer volume of knowledge about what to do about vampires and what affects them is phenomenal. I got a headache during healer training during even our short overview.”

Harry nodded slowly, and then asked carefully, “Okay. What’s your name?”

"Mellisande." She chirped. "I'm Cenhelm and Chayim's mother, Fenris' wife. I'm the healer for Salem Witches' Institute, and I teach healing as well."

Harry nodded carefully. "Okay. Thanks. Is everyone else nearby?"

"Just outside the curtains." Mellisande chirped. "Gimme a min to scan again," She waved her wand and blinked distractedly several times before smiling. "Everything's good. Head on out."

Harry nodded happily and hopped off the bed. He'd simply been laid down, clothes and all, sans shoes so he only had to slip his shoes on from where they'd been under the bed before he walked out and rejoined the group. Neville grinned as he came out.

"Hail the conquering hero, eh?"

Harry laughed. "Yeah, no problems at all. How'd it all go? I thought I heard Sirius out here ..."

"Yeah, he was here with Lily and James and all, but ..." Neville's face fell and he sighed. "They were impressed with our arsenals, but James wasn't too keen on that firewhip. You know it's borderline and all. Sirius was impressed, and so were Fenris and them, but James didn't have much to say. He walked out when Mellisande noticed you'd awakened, and Sirius just ... didn't stay. Neither did Lily or Severus, but I think they walked off on their own, along with the other adults." Indeed, they were alone in the waiting room, which was mildly surprising to Harry. Neville stood up after a moment and sighed. Harry forced a smile.

"I can't believe you didn't keep an eye on Andrew."

Neville shot him a dirty look. "How was I supposed to know he'd come out of being thrown into a wall in one piece? I at least expected him to be knocked out, not up and kicking."

"So," Harry teased, "taken out with a stunner to the back."

"Oh shut up."

Harry nodded. "How'd Eli and Luce take it?"

"They weren't surprised. They're good, but I think they're too used to not having anyone as clever as them, and they fall apart a little when faced with Alan and Andrew. They're intimidated – Alan hasn't been a duelling partner in years, so they don't know his arsenal, and Andrew doesn't interact much with anyone but Alan." Harry looked at him, and Neville blushed. "Fenris."

Harry grinned. Neville was good at quoting people. Harry had teased him previously about Hermione rubbing off on him, but hadn't for sixth months, since he'd broken up with her during his depression. Currently, the topic of Hermione wasn't welcome with Neville.

Harry glanced around and sighed. "So, where are the other kids?"

"Alan said he was going to wander some stretch of beach nearby, but that he wasn't sure if Andrew might drag him off somewhere to talk." Neville frowned. "Fenris looked a little iffy about that, but nobody said anything to him, so ..." Neville shrugged. "The other kids are probably in the game room. I was going to go there after you woke up. I won't be offended if you go find Alan, Harry." Neville pointed out when Harry had bit his lip in thought. "You don't get to see him all that much; we share practically all our classes."

Harry nodded, and gave Neville a short smile. "Alright. Do you know where to go for the beach?"

"No." Neville shook his head, "but you could ask Lyall on the main floor of the school. You do remember how to get there, right?" Neville teased.

Harry stuck out his tongue and ran out to find his way there.

A/N: And sixth year begins. No, you won't have to suffer through excessive amounts of American insanity - they're back in Britain at chapter 49 with none of those introduced here, so you can breathe a sigh of relief if that scared you and if you want more, I can add it to the oneshots. Feel free to ask questions.

And yes! We start the weekly updates. We'll have this over and done with in no time at all! Rejoice, be excited, and please Read and Review? Let me feel the Love?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-eight

The hospital area was apparently one inside the Alfaerus house, so Harry was temporarily lost until he ran into the honey-blonde Winter, Raleigh's wife, and begged the directions out of her. She gladly sent him on his way before returning to her work, and Harry darted downstairs only to stumble upon Koreol, frowning and staring upstairs without focus. Harry paused, feeling a little awkward.

"Um, sir? Are you looking for someone?" Harry asked quietly.

Koreol blinked and slid his eyes down to focus on Harry, much to Harry's discomfort. After a moment, he spoke, "I was wondering where Andrew and Alan had gotten off to. I need to speak to them."

Harry tilted his head. "I'm just heading to look for them. Neville said ... Alan would be at the shoreline, or talking with Andrew. He didn't say where."

Koreol was completely still, so Harry couldn't get an idea of what he thought, but if he didn't move again soon, Harry was going to have to snap his fingers or something. However, Koreol focused again just as Harry was considering following through and Harry froze for a long moment, unable to think.

"Please go check the trail to the shore. Go out the front door, around the building. Off to the right, there is a trail through the woods. Follow it, keeping an eye out through the trees. I believe there is a small fall of trees off the left halfway along. Check there, and then along the shores. I'll be keeping an eye on you. If they are doing anything but talking, do not interrupt, just wait. I will check on you."

When Koreol looked away, Harry had a hideous headache, and he could feel his shields as though they were half shredded. Irritably, Harry growled, "Next time just ask. I feel like you took a strimmer to my head, you numbskull." Harry bit his lip immediately but didn't take it back. Koreol merely blinked.

"The last time I saw you, you're shields were not a rival to Alan's. My apologies. Did you catch where I was telling you about?"

"Yeah ..." Harry offered. "What the Hell was that?"

"An attempt at subtle compulsion, merely to ensure you remembered and did not get distracted. It would have faded upon completion." He tilted his head, curious. "However, I can indeed see what you see. Why did that stick and the compulsion not?"

"I ..." Harry blinked. "I don't think I really fought, but ... I know I can break the Imperius, and I don't like being manipulated." He really didn't like this. If this was typical, he could see why people didn't like vampires at least. They were awfully arrogant and high-handed.

"Ah." Koreol nodded. "Alright then. Please go seek them out. Andrew ... is at a bit of a tremulous point as a young vampire, and I don't believe Alan has taken my warnings seriously. I will come find you when I have checked the buildings unless you find them first."

"Er," Harry blinked, "how does that work?"

Koreol grinned tightly. "I will explain later, or Alan will. Please, go look."

Harry nodded slowly, and hoped this didn't turn out like his talk with Dumbledore did. He still hadn't met with the old man, although he didn't blame him for the initial postponement. He couldn't have planned losing his position to Umbitch. He wasn't even sure he wanted to bother with the talk anymore. He finished trotting down the stairs as Koreol left for the back halls, and jogged out the door he remembered being indicated, and around to the right of the building. Once he got to the trees, the trail was easily identifiable. Harry had to admit he couldn't have been given better directions, at least. However, it appeared to be a long trail, and the trees made for a shadowed mess of underbrush. Trying to find someone was going to be a challenge.

After ten minutes, Harry suddenly stopped without knowing why. He couldn't remember what had stopped him until he heard someone's irritated voice. It sounded vaguely like Alan, and Harry looked to both

sides, and then settled on the left. Koreol had said there was a spot to check off the left, but this couldn't be halfway, could it?

It also wasn't much of a trail. Weeds whipped against his legs, making him grateful for having worn jeans despite the heat. At least once he ran into a spider web before he found a stacked pile of logs, taller than his head. It was clearly Alan on the other side, swearing up a storm. The pile was quite long, so Harry simply clambered up to the top and looked down before blinking in surprise, unsure. This ... wasn't looking good.

"Andrew, get a fucking grip. We've been over this; don't you dare get any closer." Alan snapped. "God, Andrew, what the Hell got into your head?" Alan was leaning back against a weatherworn log at the bottom that made an effective seat. His shirt, button up and formerly crisp white and ironed, had several spots on it and was wrinkled and open. A hickey was forming, bright red on his collarbone. It didn't look like a bite mark, not from what Harry could see. He felt a blush forming and wasn't sure what to think. Alan was quite happily dating Luna, so what the Hell was going on?

Andrew had stepped back to where Alan had pushed him, and sullenly watched Alan button up his shirt with brisk fingers. "Sorry." He mumbled. "It's just ... frustrating."

Alan snapped a glare at him. "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred, Andrew, this is not news. For some reason you can't keep a hold of yourself. Koreol would have your hide for this. I thought he was teaching you self-control?"

Andrew growled back. "My self-control is fine! You're just being a goddamn tease!"

"A tease?" Alan snapped. "How am I teasing you? Are you upset I've been going to Hogwarts? Are you upset I'm only here for three days? What's the tease? I haven't promised you anything, Andrew! I thought we were friends!"

"Apparently not!" Andrew growled. "You're all glowing because you've got Harry and Neville here, and the first people you greet back here

are Eli and Luce! You barely noticed me get back up during that fight, all distracted by Neville-“

“Neville?” Alan gaped. “If you’re going to get on my case about ignoring you, I’d have thought you’d bring up Harry. He is, after all, my best friend!”

“Harry isn’t the problem! Harry’s fine; everyone else is just getting in the way!” Andrew yelled. “And you let them!”

Alan’s eyes flashed. “Getting in the way?” He stated blandly. “You do not own me, Andrew. My friends are my friends; you will not tell me who I can be friends with.”

Harry shrank from that quiet tone. It was a Slytherin rage; be wary when they yell, and head for the hills when their voice goes quiet and even, because you just raised Holy Hell. Quickly, Harry considered his options and decided to be a Gryffindor.

“Alan, Andrew, what are you two doing down here?” Harry asked carefully. Andrew didn’t even look at him; Harry got the eerie feeling he’d known he was there all along. Alan looked up and frowned, his eyes lightening out of his rage.

“Harry. How’d you find us down here?”

“Neville told me you’d headed down to the shore.” Harry answered honestly, and then flinched as something faintly reminiscent of Koreol’s interference swept through him.

“Do you always take Neville’s word for everything?” Andrew snapped.

Harry determinedly remained calm. “Well, yeah.” Harry offered. “He’s my brother, and Alan had invited me along earlier anyways. Neville’s just going to hang out with Eli and the others.”

Alan was also frowning, but at Andrew, not Harry. It seemed he was as clueless as Harry was as to what was wrong with him. Cautiously, Harry offered, “You didn’t have any problem with meeting Neville before.”

Alan was looking curiously at Harry now, but Andrew's eyes snapped and started glowing.

"Don't you start meddling, Harry. I trust you, but it only goes so far."

Harry turned to face him dead on. "When have I ever infringed upon that, Andrew?" His voice was stubbornly calm; inside, he was praying like Hell for Koreol to get his ass out here and get Andrew back in line.

Andrew was frowning, thinking. Alan let out a deep breath, and lightly offered, "Let's just head back. We can check out the beach later, right? I'm sure everyone is missing us."

Andrew snapped. Harry didn't see, didn't feel what happened until he was rolling down the logs and cradling a broken arm. His upper arm was burning like mad; it felt like Andrew had thrown him with one hand. Either way, he was lying at the bottom of the logs, and all he could see was Andrew on top of Alan, and Alan screamed. Harry panicked before Koreol appeared out of thin air and fisted his hand firmly in Andrew's hair.

"Let. – Go." He growled.

Nothing appeared to happen for a moment, and then Koreol flung Andrew into the pile of trees with enough force to splinter the wood. Andrew rolled limply down it, and then swiftly picked himself up and got onto his knees, his head lowered. Koreol helped Alan up, and then walked over to stare down at Harry.

"Are you alright?" He asked. Harry noticed his eyes were glowing white, but dismissed it to shake his head.

"My arm got broken." Harry tried to sit up and hissed through his teeth. "I just don't have any luck this summer." He awkwardly tried to sit back, breathing carefully, trying to ignore the full-body ache coming on. Being thrown into a pile of wood was a new feeling he didn't like, about equal to the fun of crashing his broom full force – something he'd only done once and never again. Koreol easily lifted him up and helped him sit on the log. Alan stumbled over and sat next to him,

blood brilliant against his white shirt, from the slowly closing bite mark on his neck. Harry glanced at it, curiously.

"He bit you?" Harry asked softly.

Alan nodded slowly, watching Koreol look down at them with careful eyes. "Yeah ... I don't know what's gone wrong, he's never acted like this before, not even a hint of it."

Koreol turned away and stalked over to Andrew. He growled out something Harry didn't understand, and Andrew answered in kind, his voice soft, thin, and subservient. Koreol's tone grew angry, and then he dismissed him with a curt gesture, and, in English once more, "Get out of my sight. Wait for me in my rooms."

"Yes, Master." Andrew quietly answered, and then stood, his head still bowed.

"Run." Koreol shortly ordered.

Andrew didn't hesitate, and lightly bounded over the pile of trees and was gone before Harry could blink. Koreol turned back around, still angry.

"Alan, I told you over and over again to be wary of this. You didn't listen."

Alan turned away, and Harry turned a sceptical look. Alan hadn't listened to something this dangerous?

"He never pushed me." Alan defended.

"He never had to." Koreol snapped. "You practically rolled over for him every time he asked. I'm surprised you haven't had sex with him already; thank God for that, or this would have been even worse to weather."

Harry blanched. Okay, that was being curt with a vengeance.

Alan's chin went up and he blushed even as he snapped back, "I'm not interested in that, and it never came up again when I made it clear."

"Of course not." Koreol sneered. "You just let him have everything else. You knew when he offered he'd tell me; I know how often you let him give you that pleasure, even if you never reciprocated. It's how I knew we would have this problem, and while that in and of itself is not an issue, the fact that you neglected to acknowledge the dangers of it is what I object to. I told you, last year, and the year before."

Alan finally hung his head, his face bright red, unable to look at either Harry or Koreol. For Harry, he really didn't think he needed to be hearing this, but he was here, and he wasn't going to twitch wrong with Koreol so furious. There were times even Gryffindors could tell they needed to sit down and shut up, and Koreol was powerful and angry – and that isn't something to be messed with.

Alan murmured something Harry couldn't hear, and Koreol snapped, "What was that, Alan? More excuses?"

"I'd thought it would have faded with me gone for so long in between." Alan repeated louder.

"True, had he fed off another. He hasn't, not exclusively. One, or two. A boy he dated last year, and then Luce when he was curious. However, he never fed off either more than twice. The boy left him; Luce was too disturbed. That left you. You should have guessed when he visited during Christmas; made a point of it, in fact."

"He never had any such issue when Harry walked in during him feeding." Alan offered.

Harry didn't answer that. Remembering that made him remember the possessive look Andrew had had, that Alan had been too bleary to notice during that exchange.

Koreol glanced between them and then asked, blandly, "Did Harry do anything to interrupt or stop him?" Alan looked carefully at Harry, and Harry shrugged.

"I was too startled, and it wasn't like it looked like Alan was in danger." Harry offered, and then he elaborated, "And Andrew managed something like hypnosis so that the door was shut behind me. I ... I knew Alan had given Andrew blood before, so it wasn't like I assumed he didn't have permission or anything."

Koreol nodded. "Harry is no threat to him, and Andrew would have noted that. Did you also let him give you another blow job while you were there?"

Alan looked up, his face brilliant with his blush and as good an answer as if he'd spoken. Koreol didn't wait,

"So what, exactly, gave you the idea this wouldn't have happened?"

"He was my friend!" Alan shouted. "One of my only good friends; I thought I could trust him with everything, and I didn't want to make him think I didn't, alright? I know I shouldn't have, you think I haven't noticed? I knew it was dangerous, and I forgot. I'm just a stupid child, stop telling me I should have known! I didn't! I can't know everything; I can't get everything right!" Alan had burst to his feet, and now, Harry was quite certain he didn't know he was crying. He was, however, quite sure he wasn't just pissed off at himself about Andrew. He had a feeling Alan would be angry with himself for the Department of Mysteries for months, and Koreol probably wouldn't think of that. Indeed, Koreol was looking ready to blow up at Alan and treat him like he had Andrew, and that didn't need to happen. Shifting his arm convinced him standing would be stupider than what he was currently planning, so instead he simply spoke up clearly and strongly, as he'd been told to when reading a speech in class.

"Has Alan ever been exposed to a young vampire other than Andrew?" Harry asked clearly. Both Koreol and Alan looked at him, and Harry met both their eyes. "I know he hasn't, or he would have mentioned it, probably. If he doesn't have any example of what to expect, how should he know to treat Andrew differently? You are

veritable pillar of self-control, Koreol; why should he expect anything different from Andrew? You've been drilling that into his head for years with probably firmer techniques than any of the rest of us experience. Why should simply growing up make Andrew forget, make him jump him and try to control him? And you forget that Alan is no different in age than Andrew. Fifteen, sixteen ..." Harry shrugged. "When my godfather was sixteen he ran away from home. When he and his friends were fifteen they illegally became animagi. Rules mean nothing to kids our age. You haven't been anywhere near this young for centuries, I bet. You seem to have forgotten that. Just as Andrew was getting unruly, so was Alan." Harry stubbornly raised his chin and looked at Koreol's shoulder – he needed to make a point, but he'd sooner tell Voldemort to go fuck himself in person than look Koreol in the face right now. "I think the lesson's been learned, unless Andrew's going to do something like that again. Alan's under enough stress, or have you forgotten he's also dealing with Voldemort?"

Alan inhaled sharply, and Koreol sought and met Harry's eyes. He looked a little peeved, but considering what he'd just thrown at him, Harry was actually feeling he was doing pretty well.

"Alan has not met another vampire Andrew's age. Typically they are raised apart from humans, thus I, also, have not recently had to deal with this problem in such an uncontrolled situation. I surmise I had forgotten that Alan would similarly be in the same mindset as Andrew," Koreol glanced over at Alan, "although I should have guessed." He added dryly. "Heaven witness, Velorian was a Hell of a lot worse than either of them at that age. And I know of Alan's outside challenge as well." Koreol shrugged and turned his glare back on Alan. "Do not make a habit of ignoring my advice, Alan. I shall claim your injuries and your friend's as enough of a punishment. You can return on your own, Alan, and think this through. I will go ahead with Harry so as to return him to the healers. Go."

Alan, similarly to Andrew's obedience, glanced back at Harry, and then walked around the wood to a trail through the trees, his hand moving up to finger the mark left from the bite. Koreol watched him go and then looked down at Harry. A small smile was faintly in the corner of his mouth.

"You have a large amount of spirit, child. It is good for you your point was sound." Harry swallowed hard, feeling his nerves return and make his stomach writhe. 'Spirit' was one way to phrase blind obstinacy. "If you would permit me to pick you up so as to return you to the house, it would be easiest on your arm."

Harry nodded carefully, and let him do so, surprised that it didn't bother him to allow Koreol so close when he'd been so freaking scary earlier. Maybe he was just inured to it because he had no illusions that Koreol could kill him just as easily from a distance as from nearby - it wasn't like he was increasing his risk any. Koreol wouldn't hurt him after trying to calm Alan down, right? Not moving his arm sounded grand. He was feeling the bruise easily enough that he didn't need to start feeling the broken bone.

Abruptly, he felt the tight press of apparition and his eyes were assaulted with brilliant white, a stark contrast to the shade in the forest. A woman yelped loudly and managed to say something rude without using a single bad word. When he could see again, he found Mellisande standing beside a woman with dark brown hair who was the same height as Koreol. Upon noticing him, Mellisande's mouth twitched.

"Harry, child. How did you manage to land yourself back in here in less than a half hour?"

Harry blinked, and answered curtly, "I'm a Gryffindor, what can I say?"

The second woman snorted. "From what Alan says that's actually a succinct answer. Koreol, kindly put the boy down. What happened, hm?"

"You remember I warned you of Andrew potentially blowing up?" Koreol coldly answered. "Well, it should be taken care of now."

"If that's the case, what happened to Alan?" The second woman firmly asked. Mellisande was casting a diagnostic spell. Her impressed whistle preceded Koreol's answer,

"Alan is walking home to think about his recent choices." He was clearly dismissing her. "How is his arm?"

"It's a pretty thorough break, but it shouldn't be too bad. What did he do?" She asked Harry.

"Far as I can figure out, he grabbed me by the arm and threw me into the piled logs." Harry shrugged. "I couldn't really tell at the time."

Mellisande hummed again. "Autumn, get me the bruise balm, would you? I'm not gonna want to use both spells. Also, get me the Cure-all as well. There's several splinters ..."

Harry just sighed and swallowed, trying not to listen too hard to what they were saying. Koreol stood off to the side to patiently wait out the healing, and Autumn returned, setting a large squat bottle with a screw on lid on the table, and measuring a dose of another potion into a cup. "I'll presume you want a single dose of Cure-all?"

"Yes," Mellisande answered, "after I heal this. Autumn, take a look at this and tell me where you'd start?"

Harry tuned the very technical discussion of the state of his bone out, and wondered where everyone was. Chances are, nobody was thinking he'd managed to get stuck back in the hospital wing yet. Sirius and Neville would be quite impressed; so would James, if he could get over the fact that Harry wasn't his perfect son. His mother would kill him.

His arm abruptly went numb, and then he started to feel a deep ache in the muscle. Autumn quickly stood up and smiled, offering him the cup full of potion. "Here you go, drink this and that should feel much better, including the rest of your little bruises. After that, we'll just put the balm on your arm and whatever part you landed on, but you'll still have a colourful bruise or two or three for the next two days, and you should be careful about what sort of exercise you use that arm for." She grinned. "Which simply means that whatever tomfoolery you get up to should mainly use your right arm, not your left, although the worst that will happen is that you'll end up very very sore." Mellisande brushed some surprisingly warm ointment onto his arm, which quickly

soothed away the soreness of the pressure on the severe bruise. However, it was greatly helped when he drank the potion, and Harry was once more free of the hospital wing, balm on his upper left arm, most of his back, and upper right thigh as well. The soreness that had begun to plague his right arm had faded after he drank the potion.

He immediately went downstairs to meet up with Alan, but Koreol was already there. Whatever they were discussing, Alan wasn't looking up at him, simply nodding his head without speaking. Harry slowed, and then stopped at the bottom of the stairs, out of hearing range, waiting for them to finish. Abruptly, he could hear Koreol clearly.

"I understand, and hope you also understand better now, Alan. Your friend is eager to speak with you at the stairs. I must deal with Andrew. You will see him when you see him, and not a moment sooner, Alan. Do not ask."

"Yes sir." Alan responded quietly. A moment after Koreol left, he spoke up again, "You wanna come down, or do you want me to come up there, Harry?"

"Down works." Harry answered lightly, suiting his words by half-running, half-falling down the stairs in a series of quick steps. Level with Alan, Harry gave him a weak smile. "So, am I going to get that vampire explanation yet?"

Alan shrugged listlessly. "I suppose."

"Hey, you don't have to." Harry shot. "I'm just curious."

"No, I should have told you a while ago."

Harry moved to grab at Alan's arm and was painfully reminded of his bruise as he tried to use his left arm. The motion aborted, Harry turned to use his right and stop Alan in place. "Is this just because Koreol's pushing you around?" Harry snapped. "Because I don't like that."

Alan's face was still cold. "Koreol does have authority over me, Harry. That was decided when I arrived here and he noticed that Andrew

and I were of an age to each other; Andrew's a few weeks younger than me."

Harry blinked. He'd thought Andrew was older than them, personally, but that was probably because he was more mature due to his nature and 'training'.

Alan ran his hand through his hair, and grimaced. "Look, can we talk in my or your room?"

"My room." Harry decided. "Let's go. Can you talk while we walk, then?" Harry asked bitterly.

"Yeah," Alan answered. "Do you want me to start somewhere, or ..."

"How about with Andrew?" Harry asked tentatively. "I don't understand how ... how he's a vampire and yet ... he's growing up with us, apparently."

"He was turned when he was a few months old." Alan offered. "I ... Velorian said vampirism is more of a virus than a curse, I think. Babies make the virus part of their systems, but if you're older, it kinda takes over. Under the age of two, vampires are 'born' vampires, and can age normally. Over it, they're halted in place. A vampire is stronger if they're 'born' than if they're 'made'."

Harry nodded, and then looked sidelong at Alan. "Er, how did Velorian have Andrew? Velorian looks, well ..." Alan looked at him curiously, and Harry hurriedly offered, "He doesn't look old enough to have a son Andrew's age!"

"Oh." Alan answered. "He isn't. He was fifteen when he sired Alan." Harry blinked at him, disbelieving. "It actually wasn't really his choice, although it wasn't like Bellatrix." Alan flushed for some reason and looked away. "A lady who was a, um, well some people really really like vampire bites, and so they kinda let a coven – a group of vampires – sorta 'own' them. Of those, women of good breeding, which, ironically," Alan laughed quietly, "to a vampire means muggleborn witches, are sometimes sent to bring strong pureblood lines into the coven, or simply a proven strong wizard. Well, Velorian

was a typical fifteen-year-old boy, and his family is powerful and pureblood, so one of their younger women looked him up at a party, drugged him, and got herself pregnant with the help of a fertility charm. Normally, this would be ignored and probably never even noticed as he'd have just thought it a one night stand of spiked drinks with no consequences, but Koreol is honour bound as Velorian's guardian due to a favour he owed his father, and because of that, any vampire who wants to deal with Velorian has to answer to Koreol first – and Koreol picked up on the scheme. Since they didn't deal through him, and because Velorian was really hacked off about it, Koreol claimed rights to the child. There was a long, drawn out argument that resulted in Andrew being brought here and raised, but only after he'd been turned. Nine months later, I was brought into the area but Ginger wasn't sure she could raise me and neither was Regulus. Mellisande offered the help of the Alfaerus, as she knew they were already raising Andrew and the Fir's had children the same age." Alan smirked slightly. "And Mellisande also knew that Ginger had been eyeing her brother to boot."

Harry felt a little confused, but it was at least partially making sense. "Okay, so that's how that happened. Why did Koreol pick you over the other boys?"

Alan shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe because we were both effectively orphans." He pointed them further down the hall; they were almost at their rooms, and hadn't run into a soul. "Or maybe because Eli and Luce were very close as twins. Or even because I didn't have any parents freaking out about vampires. Not that Autumn is freaked about them, but whatever. I was chosen, and, honestly, me and Andrew do get along well. He's the only person who's been able to keep up with me aside from you and Neville." Alan blinked. "And Hermione. But Neville and Hermione are only knowledgeable, and Andrew is a vampire." Alan sighed. "You're as strong as me, Harry. I've never met anyone as strong as me before, aside from Dumbledore and Voldemort. I hate them. Nicholas is the only other person I've met who comes close, and he's probably about Hermione's strength, maybe a little more powerful."

"Wouldn't that make him Neville's strength?" Harry asked.

"Hermione's hit another growth spurt." Alan answered. "A magical one. She's edged him out by a hair and may still go further."

Harry nodded. That sounded fair. Hermione was quite powerful, with the wits to match. "Anyone else powering up?" Alan had a better handle on sensing people than he did; he had enough trouble with homework he didn't pry into his friends. How powerful people were didn't really matter to him.

"Ron's been moving slowly upwards; Ginny's still fairly solid, but she's got four years before her magic settles for good. Luna's saying she won't hit hers till midyear, and none of your or Neville's younger siblings are anywhere near solid. Then again, neither are we."

Harry nodded, and paused to pull open his door and bow Alan inside. They slipped in, and Harry collapsed on his bed, waving Alan down beside him. Smiling, Alan took him up on it, and rolled over.

"Alright, enough of the magic talk. Any other vampire questions?"

"I presume they can hide their teeth to stalk people better." Harry offered. Alan made a positive sound. "They can apparently stand sunlight."

"In certain doses, yeah. If they stay out too long, they start to feel sick and they get sunburns easily."

"Mellisande says they're flammable."

"Quite." Alan answered dryly. "A most amusing fact. And no worries about hurting Andrew during the duel, there are always precautions, and Koreol was present. He would have stepped in were Andrew in any danger."

"I'll presume they have reflections and no fears of holy water, garlic, or running water." Harry queried, trying to remember what he'd heard that wasn't outright ridiculous.

"Indeed. Although Andrew avoids garlic due to its strong flavour and smell. Running water would mostly be because vampires are dead

weights in water, but because they're unnaturally strong, they can swim well enough and don't have any need to breathe."

"What about shapeshifting?"

"Wolf, owl, bat, and cat." Alan listed, and then shrugged. "But that takes a lot of practice and strength. Andrew can't do that yet. They get them in order of size, actually. They also can put power in a growl, dependant upon age. Andrew can cause a bit of a discomfort, but that's about it and it won't change until he's past a century. Koreol could make your ears bleed without much effort."

Harry sighed. "Vampires are scary creatures. Koreol had only minor difficulty with my Occlumency, in trying to get into my mind and use a compulsion."

"He did what?" Alan sat up abruptly. "That's out of line!"

"He was worried about you, Alan." Harry answered, "He also sorta apologized and it didn't stick, anyways. The information did, but not his compulsion." Harry touched his temple. "I felt a little worn, though."

"Appropriately enough." Alan offered, calming down slowly. "He's immensely powerful."

"I hadn't noticed." Harry drawled. Alan straightened, and then grabbed Harry's pillow and beat him with it.

"Knave! Show respect for your elders!"

"Some mouldy corpse shall not get my regard!" Harry cried, and rolled over his bed to grab the other pillow. "En garde!"

Alan hit back, and it dissolved into a pillow fight, that also sprouted various other accoutrements from around the room including blankets, conjured bean bags, and socks with conjured tennis balls inside. When someone knocked on the door, Harry, still hyped, shouted,

“Don’t open the door! The legions of dust bunnies have us hostage and plan to take over the school!”

Whoever it was remained silent for a long moment, and then threw the door open and set off a burst of conjured blue butterflies. They flew through the room, and then detonated in puffs of blue air. Lily leaned against the doorframe and grinned.

“The butterflies should have taken care of those evil dust bunnies. What have you two been doing?”

Harry smiled goofily. “Um, pillow war?”

Lily shook her head, and then frowned. “And what on earth caused that bruise on your arm? Let me see that.”

“Mum,” Harry groaned, but obediently held out his arm. “Mellisande and Autumn already saw it. That was earlier, when I went to go find Alan. Andrew had a bit of a fit, and Koreol stepped in. I’m fine, I promise. It got broken, but Mellisande healed it. Go ask her if you don’t believe me.”

“You weren’t otherwise hurt?”

“Er,” Harry wondered if he could pull off saying no, but if she talked to Mellisande, she’d hear. And lying to her would not go over well. “Well, he kinda … threw me into a pile of logs.” Harry murmured. “They checked everything, mum, and they’re healers. Can’t you trust them?”

Lily pursed her lips, but acquiesced. “Mellisande would know how to handle teenage boys, yes, and Autumn even more so. You’re free of that now, Harry. Alan, are you also alright?”

“I’m fine ma’am.” Alan answered shortly. Harry only just noticed that he must have cleaned his shirt while walking there, because it was pristine again. But wasn’t blood hard to clean ...

“Alan, are you wearing a glamour?” Lily asked curtly. Both Harry and Alan winced. Alan sent Harry a short glare, and then looked

innocently at Lily. She wasn't fooled, and quickly cancelled it. When she saw the blood, she gasped. "Alan, what happened?"

Alan tried to push her off as she insisted on seeing his neck. "I'm fine, really." It was interesting to see Lily easily brush aside Alan's attempts, manoeuvring him so she could see in spite of the height difference. Eventually, Alan gave up and explained, "Andrew just bit me and wasn't clean about it. He was a little overwrought. It's healed, I swear, I just forgot to change my shirt."

Lily didn't let him go until she'd given the area a complete look over and sent several cleaning spells at his shirt, a few specific for blood. Harry was startled she knew them until she reminded him of how often he'd scraped something and bled on his clothes. Harry felt that made a lot of sense. She sent Alan immediately to his room to get changed, and he'd gone after throwing his hands in the air and hissing something not at all complimentary that Harry had taken mild offence at and made him to apologize for. Lily watched the unintelligible exchange with amusement. She finally smiled, and turned to Harry.

"I came to find you because I wanted to let you know that dinner will be in two hours or so."

"So early?" Harry asked.

Lily shrugged. "That's what they usually have. You can't be not hungry; you missed lunch completely. It was just after your duel when most everyone ate."

Harry blanched. "How long did that duel last?"

"Harry," Lily said with amusement. "You woke up at ten, remember?"

"Oh."

"It was only about a half-hour, so it finished around eleven thirty – you took your time getting ready. After you woke again, you got yourself lost for three hours. It's shortly after three, now, and they said the food should be ready at five-thirty, six o'clock. I haven't seen my son

since you did so well in that duel, what with your father storming off for another hare-brained reason.”

Harry winced.

“Oh Harry.” Lily sighed. “James just doesn’t know what to do with you.”

“I’m his son.” Harry bit out. “He’s supposed to be proud of my accomplishments, not fret because he doesn’t understand. Not hate me because I challenge his ideas.”

Lily didn’t say anything more and simply pulled him into a warm hug. “You can’t make him do anything, Harry. He will come around. I know he will. Severus has finally admitted you’re a brilliant student with your own ideas and talent. He told me you’re the best friend he could imagine his son having, because you are so loyal and true.”

“I think he probably keeps calling me a Slytherin.” Harry grumbled.

Lily laughed quietly. “Yes, he does keep saying that. Although lately he’s been mentioning that Alan is acting like quite the Gryffindor as though it’s a bad thing.”

“It is.” Harry grumbled, grateful Alan was out of the room. “He’s got the wrong Gryffindor traits in play, though.” Lily raised her eyebrows, and Harry quietly admitted, “I think he’s still hating himself for the Ministry outing, and the injuries we got. I don’t think it’s gotten through to him that all of us followed him out of choice, not obligation or just because he asked.”

“Harry, that is serious, but it’s also understandable on a level.” Lily pointed out. Harry frowned at her, and she put her finger to his lips. “I’m not saying it’s right. But it was his idea, and he was the leader. As such, any casualties – that includes injury, Harry – are placed on his account. I know you were all in agreement with him, but it was his godfather you rescued, and as such, his mission. You did wonderfully in there, though, and Alan needs to remember that nothing permanent happened, and he did accomplish more than one goal that evening in the most effective way. You just remind him of that.”

Harry nodded carefully, and then stepped around his mother to smile at Alan. Lily smiled as she watched them, and then called out, “Neville and the twins said to invite you two to go play Quidditch with them.”

“Did the twins say that?” Alan called. “Word for word?”

Lily frowned. “Why would that matter? Yes, they issued the invitation but I don’t recall the exact wording.”

Alan grinned. “Oh, it does have meaning. Feel free to come watch.”

Lily frowned, but followed. Harry glanced over at Alan curiously. “Why would that matter?”

“You’ll see.” Alan offered happily.

Harry frowned, but listened, waiting patiently for them to reach the Quidditch pitch behind the school hidden in a gully and guarded with heavy spells. Inside, several people were already on brooms, and Harry was surprised to see Geoffrey, Sirius, James, Lyall, and the older boy, Finnian, in addition to the twins and Neville. When Neville saw Harry and Alan approaching he immediately flew over to the stands and traded out with Nanna. Harry watched his sister mount her broom with glee and groaned. “Oh man.”

“What?” Alan asked.

“Nanna and my father are playing.”

“So?” Alan queried again, leading them to the broomshed.

“Big time competition, especially with my dad being moody.”

“Maybe you two should be on the same team in this instance, then.” Alan grinned.

Harry blinked, accepting the broom without looking at it too hard. Alan's grin only widened, and he took to the air. Harry mounted the broom and followed, taking a moment to realize Alan had given him a firebolt. Quickly he caught up to his friend, tailing him as he came up beside Geoffrey.

"What are we going to play, Jeff?"

Geoffrey grinned. "Quidditch, or Jousting?"

"Quidditch would be better." Alan offered. "Harry got himself roughed up a bit. Pillow war." He explained.

Geoffrey and the twins laughed; Harry felt a little miffed Alan was playing it up like he'd won – Harry had won that war, thank you very much – but it explained the injury without going into Andrew. There were several raised eyebrows but no questions, and Geoffrey blew a whistle he had around his neck.

"Right, we've got me and James, Eli, Luce and Nanna playing against Sirius, Lyall, Harry, Alan and Finnian. Its Quidditch, boys. Charm your shirts or hair or whatever – we're red. Your colours?"

Harry answered immediately, "Green." Alan elbowed him. "What?" Harry defended. "It's only because Sirius would look good with green hair, honest."

Alan rolled his eyes again and carefully used the colour-changing spell. Behind them, Lyall had already spelled Sirius' and her own hair, and Finnian had as well. Harry did his own and retreated to their set of goals, nearer the school. Strangely, Winter was down with a large basket full of quaffles nearby, and she moved into the middle of the stadium.

"On the count of three, one – two – three." She blew her whistle, and threw the ball into the air. Sirius snatched at it, and missed; James flew up and forward, and passed to Geoffrey who pitched it through the far goal. Harry felt completely lost.

"Alan, what's going on?"

"We're all Chasers, and whoever's nearest defends the goals or someone designates themselves." Alan quickly answered, then passed Harry the quaffle. "And that's not a quaffle."

Harry blinked, and remembered abruptly that in Quodpot the quaffle exploded. He quickly threw it back to Alan. "You're crazy!"

Alan laughed and raced up the pitch. Harry sighed and chased after it. After all, it was all just a game.

III

Harry's arm was sore the next morning, but he felt it was certainly worth it to have tried out broom jousting, ill advised idea or not.

This morning he'd woken early – nine-thirty, amazingly enough – but since Alan was just as tired as he was, it wasn't like he was woken up. Breakfast had been surrounded by the laughter of the younger Alfaerus who weren't tuckered out by the stunts the older children hadn't been prevented from joining in. Harry was startled to hear that Neville had disappeared somewhere, and had left note that he probably would be absent all afternoon. Harry presumed he'd disappeared into the library. Neville was prone to that, and since Lily wasn't concerned, Harry didn't bother himself with it. Neville answered better to his godmother than Harry ever had. Even with Lily being his actual mother he didn't answer too well, much less to his godmother, Alice.

Alan had woken up roughly at the same time as Harry, and after finishing breakfast they delved through the library for books, and potentially finding Neville. When they didn't find him and bored of the books they'd gotten distracted with after a few hours, Alan took him to get into his swim trunks and they'd disappeared down the trail to wander the shoreline and swim. The Alfaerus had claimed an area as theirs, protected and shielded so that no one could see and the students couldn't leave the designated area. They spent most of the afternoon out there themselves, joined eventually by the adult males and the other boys. What followed was more ill-conceived games and tomfoolery that left everyone similarly sore and open to the ladies

scolds and heavy sighs. Harry didn't care. He'd enjoyed himself more than he'd imagined.

However, Harry had noticed that Neville had not shown up at the swimming, and he hadn't heard from him all day either. However Neville did show up at supper, looking thoughtful. After the late meal was over, as the men hadn't gotten back until near to seven in the evening, Neville looked up and met Harry's eyes, shortly nodding upstairs. Harry excused himself to Alan and followed Neville into his room. His stuff was all ready to be packed – they were leaving tomorrow afternoon – but his bed had some half-folded clothes on it that Neville quickly finished up as Harry leaned against the far end of his sleigh bed.

"Where were you all day?" Harry asked pleasantly.

Neville answered, mildly distracted as he kept putting things away. "I was talking with Andrew, actually."

"Andrew?" Harry straightened. Andrew had been resentful of Neville when they'd gotten into a fight with him.

"Koreol suggested it would help both him and I, and he was right. Andrew recognizes his foolishness in lashing out, and he ..." Neville nervously smoothed the shirt he was folding. "He helped a lot with how ... how shy I've gotten. You haven't really noticed, Harry, but mum and Melanie ..."

"You have been shy." Harry pointed out. "You never volunteered to answer during second term. You rarely spoke up."

"I was also touch shy." Neville offered quietly. "Especially with my mum and Melanie. It's half the reason I couldn't bring myself to make up with Hermione."

"Andrew helped?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. He helped a lot. He also ..." Neville chewed his lip, and quietly said, "I never knew ... Alan mentioned he thought it might be the case, but ... you want to know why Velorian attacked Lucius? You

remember your dad telling you about that." Harry nodded. The case had been in the news shortly after the fight in the Department of Mysteries. "Bellatrix had gone after him during the first war while he was visiting Lucius. Lucius hadn't stopped her, and then tried to Obliviate him, but Koreol broke it. That's why Velorian was so intent on bringing him down."

"Ah." Harry nodded slowly, and then gently put his hand on Neville's shoulder. Neville went still, and then put his hand over Harry's.

"Thanks." Neville said. "For understanding."

"And being stubborn enough to put my nose where it isn't welcome?" Harry offered lightly.

"That too. Even when it's already been bitten once." Neville answered surprisingly seriously, smiling still.

"So ..." Harry started to ask, but Neville cut him off.

"I'm sure you don't want details, Harry, and if you still do I'm not sharing."

Harry blinked, remembered this was Andrew they were talking about, and then nodded sharply. "I'll take your word for that. Want to challenge Alan to a chess tournament to while away the evening?"

"Sure, but I'm not challenging Alan first. We'll talk everyone into drawing straws and laugh while Sirius and Geoffrey manage to fail miserably against each other."

Harry thought about it and nodded. "Sounds good. What if Geoffrey can actually play?"

"Then we'll laugh as he soundly trounces Sirius."

Harry put his arm around Neville's shoulders and laughed with him, pleased with Neville's turn around, pleased that Andrew was apparently pulling himself back together, and pleased that he was

finally getting taller so he actually could put his arm on Neville's shoulders. Even if it was a stretch.

A/N: Here we go. The end of Salem, and next week ... the trip home. And more fun stuff. You know you want it...

Partial credit for the Vampire base idea goes to Miranda Flairgold. I rather elaborated upon the concept, but hers inspired it.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Forty-nine

Coming off of the portkey, Harry wondered if flying by airplane might have been the better idea. At least he wouldn't stumble. He was pleased to meet up with Frank and Alice. His father had said they'd be getting an auror escort, and Harry had hoped it would be the Longbottoms. His godparents were asked a short set of questions before they hugged their son and James stepped off the porch to talk to them. Lily whispered something to Severus, and Alan stepped up behind Harry to look around the dilapidated house whose porch they'd landed on.

"What a portkey location. Why didn't we go to somewhere else?"

"The Ministry is panicking about transport and wanted to ensure we didn't bring some insane American with explosives strapped to his ass." Harry deadpanned. "Thus, the guard. I'm sure the Longbottoms will strip search us all." Harry brought his face back to looking lively. "Which makes me strongly suspect that, for our trip, this is just a formality in form with the rest of their plans."

"Probably." Alan agreed. "Where to from here?"

"There are anti-apparition wards. We have to walk outside of them before we'll all leave to Potter Mansion."

"How did you talk your father into that?"

"Wasn't me, it was mum. Its not like Severus is staying, and Grimmauld is depressing."

Alan's face tightened, and Harry remembered abruptly that it would be harder for Alan with Regulus stuck in America due to his injuries. In addition, the Ministry was still unhappy with Regulus, no matter the evidence, publicity, or official stance. The only high point in regards to British government had been the article two days ago of Umbridge turning up horribly mutilated in an apparent Death Eater attack despite the lack of Dark Mark. Harry hadn't been able to not smile at the article. Neither had his mother.

"Come on, now. Let's get moving." Frank called.

Lily and Severus ushered the two boys and Nanna out the door, and they walked down the path together, laughing and joking.

It didn't last.

They weren't twenty metres from the building when spells flashed through the trees, green and red, and everyone scattered. Lily screamed, hit with the Cruciatus, and Harry sent a blasting curse through the trees, mirrored by Severus. Someone out there yelled, but Lily was still screaming. Furious, Harry threw Finite Incantatem, as strong as he could. He was surprised when it worked, but didn't pause.

Someone in the woods yelled, "Stop the Killing Curse, Prince is there! He'll have your hides if he dies!" Alan, furious, threw a dark purple curse in the direction of the voice, but thankfully the air cleared of green. James ran over to them, and grabbed Lily's arm.

"What happened to her?"

"Cruciatus." Harry's voice came out choked.

James merely nodded and barked, "Get up there with the others. Snape, c'mon."

Harry backed over to the group and threw another spell before gasping out, "What are we going to do?"

"Get out, clearly." Alice snapped briskly. "Where's Sirius?" Nanna was already behind her, peeking around and whispering several spells. Harry didn't think her mother had noticed.

"He's over there, to the right." Harry pointed out.

Frank looked and swore. "He's down, anyone know?"

"He's still moving." Neville answered. "I think it was a bludgeoning curse or similar."

"Well?" Harry demanded. He was getting worried. "What now?"

"We need a plan." James started. "To get- Scatter!"

Harry looked up. Someone had brought along a band of trolls. He didn't even want to start thinking about how they got them in there; he just wanted to get them out. With everyone milling around, Harry ran to Sirius' side and pulled him off the ground. Frank crouched with him and got his arm around his shoulder.

"We need to get into the house; we can defend it from there, if someone can do something about those trolls."

Harry immediately thought of Fiendfyre, highly illegal and hard to control. Almost unfortunately he felt quite capable of it. As he ran with Frank to the door, he came up the steps and saw Neville there, biting his lip and eyeing the trolls as well. Their eyes met, and Harry abruptly turned to Frank,

"Can I do something illegal about them?" He asked.

Frank looked down at him, frowned tightly, glanced at the trolls and Death Eaters, and said cautiously, "Don't kill anything more than you have to, and I won't breathe a word of it."

Harry turned and waved his wand sharply; Neville waited by the door behind him to back him up if something went wrong, and a wave of dark, twisting fire struggled and streamed out of his wand, becoming something alive and racing in a line along the ground, spreading through the air to catch hold on each of the five trolls who began to scream. Harry kept a firm hold on what it was doing; where it was. He didn't see Frank and James come out to keep the Death Eaters back, didn't see Severus come out and choke, or Neville push him back, talking quickly to keep him from interfering.

He also didn't see the small rat racing up to the porch, nor the black case strapped to its back that it deposited under the porch.

When Harry felt secure that the trolls were unable to continue, or at least easily disposable, he forced the fire to go out on each one, halting it completely. The cursed fire fought, gorged on flesh, but he brought it down, staggering backwards once he was confident it was under control. Neville moved to catch him, and the porch exploded.

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Neville rolled as he came to the ground, and as quickly as he could regain his feet he was scrambling up and scanning his surroundings. James was at Harry's side, and two Death Eaters were already approaching. Neville cast, and they fell unconscious, one to a stunner, and the other a bludgeoning curse to the head. Neville ran back to the porch, gasping as something pulled in his leg. He cursed another Death Eater aside in aide of his father, and then hollering at him to hurry back. Frank disposed of another, and followed after, ushering him on. They arrived at the door and jumped the now two-foot-step leading inside and Neville was ushered back, away from the door. He didn't hesitate and layered protection spells he knew on the doors and the stairwell upstairs. Turning, he quickly asked, "Are the windows upstairs blocked?"

"Alan did them." Alice answered. "He should be back down shortly."

Alan indeed raced down the stairs and nearly ran into Neville's barrier before Neville lifted it momentarily to allow him through. Alan shot him a smile, and then went back to the door. "Is everyone inside?"

"James hasn't come back yet. Severus is standing and waiting. That should be everybody."

The door was knocked upon sharply again and Lily jerked it open, wand ready. It was Severus with an unconscious James. Frank pulled him through, and then helped Severus up before the door was slammed shut and locked again.

Abruptly the frame shivered, and then pounding began on the shuttered windows. The door shuddered again and the wood groaned. Frank angrily cleared everyone away and changed. Neville hardly noticed, but Alan let out a quiet, "Sweet," at the large brown bear now

leaning against the wood. When it shuddered again, Frank growled loudly. Neville could imagine the ‘eep’ that might result if it were actually heard, but he was too distracted with the half-pressure he was feeling as the Death Eaters tested his warding on the bottom floor.

Alan suddenly whimpered. “Neville, do you have the bottom floor fully warded yourself?”

“Every opening.” Neville answered quickly. “Do you need to concentrate upstairs?”

“Yeah.”

Neville poured more magic into the spells and then said, “Go ahead.”

When Alan dropped his layer the pressure suddenly doubled and Neville swooned. Someone stepped behind him and caught him. He didn’t have to look up to know it was his mother. She probably still had her wand trained on the door, too.

Suddenly the pounding lessened, and then dropped; almost at the same moment, Lily gave a strangled gasp and screamed,

“God, Frank, where’s Harry?”

Neville’s stomach dropped into his feet; his ears roared.

“Harry’s not in here; he’s still outside! Alice, where is he?”

“Lily, stop, we can’t go after him; it’s too late!” Alice answered her, Frank still holding the door as a bear.

‘No,’ Neville felt like he was floating. ‘Harry can’t be missing.’

“Frank, let me out, let me out!”

‘It has to be a mistake.’

"Lily, if you don't stop, I'll stun you! There's nothing we can do; James and Sirius are unconscious; Nanna can't fight. We're barely holding here as it stands."

'Merlin, please, not Harry. Hasn't enough happened to us?'

"Lily, calm down."

Severus' voice rumbled, but the roaring stopped in Neville's ears, replaced by Lily's broken sobs, and Nanna's soft sniffles. Abruptly, he realized the pressure on the wards was gone; he wasn't feeling anything from them, and he straightened awkwardly. Beside him, Alan did the same, his face so pale Neville expected him to faint. Frank changed back slowly, and eyed the door.

"The assault stopped." He said softly.

Alan shattered. He ran for the door, and Neville caught him without thinking, without heeding his own desire to run out there screaming for his brother. Alan couldn't control himself,

"Let me go, I have to find him! They can't have him; they can't have Harry! Let me go, Neville!"

Neville held him without thinking, his face expressionless, emotionless. Abruptly, he was holding a fury ball of claws, and he yelped and let go. The small kneazle raced for the door, but Nanna grabbed him off the floor and held him without a care for his snarling and slashing. Grabbing his paws, she brokenly fell to the ground and starting murmuring nothings, her eyes closed tightly as she focused on holding onto Alan. Frank watched with his own emotions tightly leashed and then glanced over past Neville. Neville turned to find James stirring dizzily. He woke and lurched to his feet. His eyes scanned the room and flinched.

"Where's Harry? He should be in here." He demanded. He was staring at Frank, but Frank could only shake his head slowly. James staggered. "But ... I got to him. I got him out of there. Where is he?"

"James." Severus stepped forward, using the name cautiously. "They were gone when I found you unconscious beyond the remains of the porch. We only realized he wasn't in here after several minutes had gone by." Severus didn't finish the obvious. Didn't repeat the only answers.

James looked around, trying to find something to think about, to focus on. "Where's Alan?"

"In Nanna's arms." Severus seemed the only one coherent. "He's ... no better off than any of us."

"I need to check outside." Frank announced. "James, stay here with your brother and wife. Severus, come with me."

Nobody argued. They were too deeply in shock. When Frank and Severus returned fifteen minutes later, Neville was too numb to care they'd found nothing. His ears roared again, and then his eyes blacked out.

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Harry blinked his eyes open and winced. His body ached; what had happened? He'd gotten the fire under control, and while he'd felt like he was going to faint he didn't think he had. But ... he couldn't remember anything in between, so maybe...

"Awake, are we, little Potter?"

Cold ran down his limbs. That sibilant voice wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the safe house. Abruptly he noticed he wasn't on grass, nor wood. Cold stone pressed against his cheek, and the air smelled damp and musty. Fighting the desire to shiver, Harry looked up.

'Can I excuse fainting for over-doing it earlier with the spell, or would that just look sissy?'

Red eyes looked back, the pasty white face smiling slightly. He'd seen the face before; he'd fought him in the Department of Mysteries

and survived, a remarkable feat aided by the arrival of his father and Alan. Harry felt a twinge; he was regretting not being on good terms with his dad right now, but he straightened, or tried to.

“Crucio.”

The pain blinded him; he landed hard on his arms as he crumpled forward around himself, defensively, reflexively, and not with much choice. Scrapes burned on his arms and cheek. A moment and an hour later, he could breathe again and gasped in air, stubbornly straightening again to look up at Voldemort’s intense amusement.

“You do have spirit, don’t you?” He murmured. “Well then.” Voldemort briskly stood and waved his arm expansively. Harry had been stubbornly ignoring the audience, but didn’t find much choice now. He swallowed; he wasn’t at all unconcerned with what was going to happen. He didn’t think they were here for a tea party, either.

“I see you’re all quite interested in our little guest tonight. I was most pleased to see him here, alive, and in one piece. It will be far more entertaining to break the son of the strongest Aurors in Britain.” Paced around back to facing him, Voldemort stepped forward and lifted Harry’s chin with his slippers foot. Harry eyed the toes, curious if he could move fast enough to bite him, or if he wanted to risk what might be on those shoes. Couldn’t be worse than what was coming, he supposed. As Voldemort looked down at him again, Harry shivered. Voldemort smiled.

“I think this will be more fun in a further meeting. Dolohov, you brought him in. Do you wish first blood?”

Harry fought to control his breathing, but Dolohov murmured a suitably humble acceptance, his voice thick with pleasure. Harry decided he wasn’t really interested in waiting around; he’d sooner be dead. When he tried to struggle to his feet, however, he was suddenly cursed again; he couldn’t think for the pain. When it let up, he was curled up on the floor again. He could taste blood in his mouth.

A white masked face bent over him and grabbed his shoulder, hauling him to his feet. He noted irritably that the man was taller than him, and that galvanized him to kick the man's shins, grabbing his arm and digging his fingers in between the bones. The masked figure swore and dropped him, grabbing for his throat with his other hand, a hand Harry shifted his attention to, grabbing and pinching the same place, sparing a hand to pull his fingers abruptly out of socket, forcing them backwards. The masked man who was likely Dolohov screamed, and Harry broke away. Behind him were the men garbed in black; ahead was a dark hallway. Harry couldn't tell immediately, but there might have been something there...

He didn't wait to be certain; if he couldn't get out, he would be dead and either was preferable to torture. He ran to the end and was startled to find a ladder there. He didn't even hesitate to start climbing.

He didn't succeed. Halfway up, he blacked out again, whether to a spell or a strike, he didn't know. When he woke, he was in a nightmare of pain, a nightmare that was reality. Strapped to a table, Dolohov had already started cutting, and Harry gritted his teeth, and tried to hide, tried to escape the pain.

It didn't seem to help all that much.

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The meeting in Grimmauld place was tense, not the least of which because neither Neville nor Alan would leave the meeting room. Molly tried to argue, but when she mentioned they were too young to be involved in the war, Neville had had enough.

"Cut it out! The only person who believes that shit is you!" Alice tried to put her hand on Neville, to pull him aside or cover his mouth; Neville didn't care. He rudely shrugged her off and leaned forward on the table to continue. "We're involved in this war whether you like it or not! I've been attacked; me, personally, by this war, and Alan is more involved than he ever wanted to be; he's been targeted twice directly by the Dark Lord, and if you believe he'll stop targeting us, you're wrong. Our best friend has been kidnapped by Death Eaters, and I don't care why they did it, but I know they're not going to get away

with it. You can say all the pretty words you like, but I'm one of the strongest people in this room; Alan is the strongest until Dumbledore arrives, and you're not going to stop me! I will remain here, I will help, and if you want to stop me from helping to save my brother you are going to have to start praying, because I will not allow you to stop me! If you can't handle the price of war, Mrs. Weasley, what the Hell are you doing in this room?"

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom, but I think that is sufficient."

Neville flushed; he hadn't heard Dumbledore come in. Of course, he had been yelling. Quickly he stepped back from the table and apologized shortly. Dumbledore just smiled, and turned a sad look to Molly.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Molly, but Neville is right in essence. The war has drawn our children in whether we like it or not. It is a price we are forced to pay, and none of us are happy about it. I do believe this meeting should start. Alan, Neville, please. Take a seat."

Alan sat next to his father and pulled out the chair next to himself. Neville took a moment to try and calm down and then sat, finding himself half-surprised that his mother and father sat next to him. Across from him, Moody growled.

"A half-trained student is going to be nothing but trouble in the Order, Dumbledore."

Alan and Neville bristled, but Frank cut in, "These purportedly 'half-trained' students were quite capable of warding the house we were trapped in, Moody, within minutes. I think you should reconsider your label."

"You warded the house?" Moody growled. "What spell did you use?"

Neville blinked. "The Greenhorn Wall."

Moody fixed Alan. "And you? The same?" Alan nodded. "Where did you learn those?"

"I taught myself." Neville answered. "And Geoffrey helped me refine it, and taught it to the rest of our group."

"What other advanced spells do you know?" Moody demanded.

"Favreau's Mantle of Innocuity, Porrybaxter's wall of Wings, the Patronus charm, Grizztabell's Whip of Flame, Fiendfyre, the Protean charm, several spells that the Marauders and the Weasley twins thought up." Neville listed. "I taught myself all of them, save a few."

"Fiendfyre is illegal." Moody growled.

"Are you going to arrest me?" Neville returned. "Harry just saved our lives with it. I taught him that."

Moody's eye flicked to Frank, who nodded slowly. "He's right. Harry used it to kill the trolls that were brought in on the attack. You know most spells are illegal typically in application, Moody. We don't need to interrogate them, we need to get to the point of figuring out how to save Harry." Frank glared Moody down; as it was, he was effectively the closest parent Harry had in the room – the Marauders were family in all but blood. James and Sirius were laid up with Poppy, Lily tranquilized at their sides.

Moody continued to grouse under his breath, but Dumbledore spoke up. "As it stands, that is our foremost goal. James reported that Harry survived the explosion of the porch, and he went to save him. He was convinced he had him in hand, and then blacked out. This is disturbing." Dumbledore finished. "As we all know, James is as much a target as his son. Unless someone mistook the two of them for each other, they specifically have targeted Harry. There is a strong possibility he is dead."

"I doubt it." Alan interjected. He hadn't looked up from the table; indeed, he was unusually silent. "They're probably going to torture him. It's going to be the same as Regulus." Alan's voice twisted with contempt. "He's more useful alive."

Dumbledore sadly nodded. "That is also a strong possibility."

Alan nodded dumbly, and then pulled out his mirror and spoke into it, "Ginger." It was quiet enough to go unnoticed. Dumbledore continued to speak of places to check, people to ask, and moved on into other news, but Neville listened in on Alan addressing his mirror.

Irritably, Ginger answered. "What is it? I thought - Alan. What do you need, honey?" Her tone abruptly turned around. "Sorry, I was busy. What is it?"

"We got attacked just outside the drop off." Alan answered. "Harry got taken. I ... I wanted to ask Regulus if he had some idea of where to look, so that we can get him back." Alan's voice broke slightly, and Neville finally reached over to touch his leg. Alan shot him a curious look, but returned his attention to the mirror immediately.

"Alright. I'll go tell him. Do you want to stay on with me?"

"Yeah." Alan whispered. "I don't like this."

"No one would, Alan." Ginger reassured him. "Uff, you would pick snack-time for Riley, wouldn't you?"

That sent both Alan and Neville into snickers. Alice elbowed Neville curiously, and, as Ginger and Alan weren't talking now, Neville leaned over to share what Alan was asking with his mother. If he did get the information, it was going to be shared with the Order anyways. Alice nodded approval, and turned back to listening to Dumbledore as Neville leaned to hear Ginger having a conversation with someone outside the mirror. After a moment, she huffed and her smiling face returned.

"I do hope your Headmaster won't mind a sudden guest. Regulus is insisting on going over there immediately. He's well enough, but there will be a letter for your Healer and a box of required potions. He's got several ideas. Under no circumstances does he leave the house, do you hear me?"

"Yes Ginger, thank you."

"I'm cutting out, then. He should be there in ten minutes. Your floo's still open?"

"Should be. I'll let Dumbledore know."

"Alright, and good luck, Alan."

Alan tucked the mirror down, and looked up quickly. Dumbledore paused; he'd been just wrapping up another order, and looked down at Alan.

"Regulus is coming over through the floo. He has several ideas that might help."

"The floo is open and he's in the secret." Dumbledore allowed. "Is he well enough?"

"He's being sent with a letter from his healers and a box of potions, but he's not to leave the house."

"Very well. We'll be expecting him, then. I believe any more planning can wait; Molly, you said you had some refreshments we might enjoy. Would you bring them?"

Molly hurried to the kitchen to do so, and Neville gently put his arm around Alan's shoulders. Alan didn't fight and just leaned against him sadly. Even the very well made muffins and biscuits weren't much of a distraction. However, the floo flared and Regulus stumbled out, balancing with relative indignity against the box in his hand, a counter to the several rolled papers in his other. He glanced around and smiled tightly.

"Hello, I've got a letter for the healer and maps. Where can I spread them out?"

The Order moved to clear the table immediately, as Molly volunteered to take the potions and letter to Pomfrey. Regulus laid the rest of the scrolls on the table, and demanded the location of the drop point. Hearing it, he grinned and selected a scroll to roll out.

"It was here? You're sure?" Regulus grinned. "There's a base right here." His hand moved several inches from the point. "Parkinson's cottage. It's well hidden – although it is in the older genealogies, and it had been mentioned while I was a Death Eater, so I'm confident that it would be useful as a base. And since they're moving Harry, it's even more likely that if they weren't already there, they'll at least be keeping him there."

"Why?" Emmeline asked. "Why not go farther?"

"They probably couldn't unless it was the Dark Lord himself moving Harry. Harry's extremely powerful; anyone with less power than him will have trouble apparating him alongside them, even if he's unconscious or even just upset – it'd be nigh impossible if he were awake, antagonistic, and they were significantly weaker. Of course, the converse is true – if you're side-along apparating him and he's eager and agreeable, it will make it several times easier simply because you can use some of his magic stores."

Alice shook her head. "It was never a problem when he was a child."

"His magic was undeveloped. He's grown up now, and more aware of it, so now it's quite capable of responding to his whims with form and strength. Adults learn to put a stop to it, but he's not old enough to do so and with the war on there's no inclination for him to start. Either way, he's very likely to be here."

"Is there any way to check?"

Silence fell for a long moment, and Dumbledore rubbed his nose. "There are options, but they are often difficult, or nebulous. Divination..."

Alan bit his lip then spoke up, "Luna might be able to try."

"Luna Lovegood?" Dumbledore asked.

"She has a talent with cards." Alan offered quietly. "I trust her ability. I trust her, and so does Harry."

Dumbledore remained silent again. "It is late, and there is much to do. If those of you I gave assignments to could seek your contacts, we can meet up again in the morning. I will contact the Lovegoods, and see about bringing Luna here, or to Potter Mansion at least.

Alan started to complain; Neville presumed he was going to ask the same thing he was, that they couldn't wait, couldn't stop, they had to get to Harry immediately, but Alice put her hand on Neville's shoulder and touched his forehead.

"Neville, you're feeling very warm. You wore yourself out and you need to sleep. Molly should be bringing in hot cocoa; please drink it and then go to your room."

Neville wanted to complain, but hot cocoa sounded divine; it wasn't like he was going to go to sleep tonight anyways. Chocolate should help. Alan also got a cup.

He was asleep by the time he was halfway through it.

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It was sometime after morning. Harry was fairly sure of that, because someone had pulled Fenrir off him with the admonition that morning was coming, he was needed elsewhere, and they didn't want the boy dead. Water had been brought in, and he'd been left to lie on the floor, sore and aching. He'd have thought when the pain got this bad it would all become indistinguishable, but no. No, he could still feel it, still feel the tenderness in his leg where his bone had been broken and haphazardly healed, still feel the stinging of the sweat that had dripped onto him as it slid into the cuts that covered more area than skin.

He drank the water without caring if it was drugged or poisoned. Apparently it had been drugged, because he was waking up again and still feeling sore but it was less than it had been. Probably sleeping and mild healing, then. He struggled to sit up, and found the strength to curl into the corner. His mind flinched away from what had happened, until he bit his lip and growled at himself.

'Face it. It was torture, and – and rape. Dolohov cut you to ribbons and looked like he was getting off on it, and then Fenrir walked by and was apparently a good boy so he got a turn with a more ... direct approach.' He snorted. When Fenrir had come in, he distinctly remembered Dolohov looking like he'd been a toddler told to share. Maybe it was a side affect of sadism, that sort of childish behaviour.

Harry ran his hand through his hair and shivered. Acknowledging stopped his mind from running in circles, but it didn't ease the panic of what was still coming. He didn't know what would happen to him; would they kill him? It would be more welcome than torture, but he didn't think Voldemort was planning that.

"It will be far more entertaining to break the son of the strongest Aurors in Britain."

Oh, yes, that was a promise of more torture.

Harry bit his cheek and glared at the wall. 'Yeah, you son of a Bitch. I fought you to your face, and I refuse to bow to you. I'll scream; I'll bleed. But I swear, I will never be your slave. Never.'

Bitter laughter touched his lips. To be Gryffindor, or Slytherin? Which would get him through this sane?

He didn't know.

He leaned against the wall and picked up the bowl of water again, drinking deeply once more.

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Neville raced downstairs in a blazing fury, and slammed into the kitchen. His mother and father were in there already, along with most of the Order, and he growled.

"You drugged me!"

"You wouldn't have slept, otherwise, Neville." Alice calmly pointed out.
"You had to sleep."

"What about Harry?"

"What could you do for him if you stayed up all night, Neville?" Frank pointed out. "And you said you wanted to go rescue him." Frank gave him a pointed look. "You can't do that on no sleep. I promise you will at least be told when the attempt is made if you are not part of it. It didn't happen last night."

Neville opened and closed his mouth several times, and then gave in with a growl. They were right. He could do nothing for Harry if he was tired, and nothing had happened over night on their end. They didn't even know where he was. "Has Dumbledore gone for the Lovegoods yet?"

"He's speaking to them now." Alice said, mildly surprised. "I never thought you one to believe in Divination."

"Not really, but Luna knows what she's doing." Neville sat down and found Kreacher quickly slipping a tray with breakfast on it in front of him. It was heaped, but he was starving. "And I'm desperate enough I'd almost trust Trelawney if I didn't know the only thing she was ever right about was that stupid prophecy about Voldemort. Luna's made some leaps of logic I trust with her cards."

"Like what?" Alice asked, curious.

Neville looked away, but Alan spoke up from the door. "'Neville just needed to be kicked in the head again. It'll happen a few more times, and then the house of cards he built will fall down.' That was during Neville's post-Christmas fit." He walked in and sat down at his own place, accepting the tray with a wave of his hand. "That's how she said it when she brought it up at least. I think she determined cards for each of us out of her deck, or she arbitrarily chose them. I'm not sure which. She'll be able to manage something."

Silence fell again. The breakfast was almost finished when Dumbledore flooded in, followed by Luna. Alan immediately stood from

his chair to greet her, and, from what Neville could see at his angle, kiss her. A faint longing stirred, memories of Hermione, but Neville pushed it aside. He would deal with that later. He needed to focus on Harry.

With Luna properly greeted, Alan led her to the table where she wasted no time pulling out her deck, shuffling it several times, and then she dealt out several random cards. Turning the top one, she smiled and tapped the card. "This card is Harry. Good. And ..." She flipped over the dealt cards, reading whatever sequence it was faster than he could understand. Finally, she reshuffled and dealt again. "You already know where he is. Your suspicion is right." She looked up at Dumbledore and smiled. "I could also read he was below ground. And he's still sane. That's it. Isn't there a tracking function on that watchkey?"

"He doesn't have it anymore." James rasped. Neville was surprised he was up. He'd been so distraught the evening before Pomfrey had knocked him and Lily out for their own safety. "Lily's necklace warmed up hours ago. They probably would move it on purpose to throw us off."

Luna dealt another card and nodded. "Likely." She pulled it back together and began shuffling the cards again, humming.

"Dumbledore, if we have a place to go I want to find him now."

"James, we cannot act rashly." Dumbledore shook his head. "Regulus told us the layout, yes, and with what we know the best team would be as few as possible. I was hoping to send Kingsley and Moody in alone, but they are both working and will not be able to get away. If they are found illicitly in a purebloods house, they could be in deep trouble, but it would be far less than if you or Neville were found. That could create a blood feud, especially if you do not find Harry. Such proceedings would tie you up. If we can wait two more days –"

"The full moon is in two days." Luna abruptly answered. "I wouldn't wait for that." She eyed the card in her hand again. "Or it's telling me that Moony should go. I'm not sure which." She eyed it again,

reshuffled, and plucked the card out once more. “Or both. Werewolves are quite strong.”

Neville was tired of just listening and stood, slamming his hands on the table. “If you’re believing Luna, Harry is still alive and sane right now. Do you want to see what two days will do to him, Dumbledore? Are you still honing a weapon, or are you going to remember that the only chance he has is sitting in this room twiddling its thumbs? And what if they move him? Are you going to give them more time to torture, more chance to do worse?”

Dumbledore closed his eyes a moment, and then nodded. “Very well. At least wait until this evening, for the cover of darkness. Neville, you, James and Remus will go alone. If you are as capable with a protean charm as you claim, please spell another set of necklaces so as to report your status, to at least give yourselves an option for panic. I will go inform Remus, and set up a few distractions.”

Neville sank back into his seat and sent an apologetic look at his parents. Alice pulled him close and kissed his forehead. “Neville, I’m very proud of you for defending your friend. Just come home, please?”

“Of course.” Neville murmured back. “And I’ll bring Harry with me.”

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The hours until nightfall were maddening. It was summer, and the sun didn’t set until nearly nine-thirty. Waiting for darkness was slowly driving a tic in his temple, but Remus rested his hand on his shoulder and Neville calmed himself. He could do this, for Harry. Because he couldn’t lose his cool, because he was the ballast in this fight, he was only allowed to come because he would be excellent at defence.

They were to portkey into the area nearby, go in, fetch Harry, and portkey back out, but they’d have to leave the house due to the wards. In aid of that, the Order was planning a raid on a Death Eater safehouse they suspected was stocked with items such as dragon hide and potions ingredients. It was a house they would have to defend. Hopefully it would clear out the building. Alan had stormed up

to his rooms an hour ago, unwilling to watch Neville leave while he was kept back. He hadn't thrown a fit at all when everyone planned on Neville going and not him. He'd taken it so calmly Neville knew something was wrong, but before he could open his mouth, Luna simply touched his arm and shook her head, smiling at him.

"Worry about Harry. I'll make sure Alan is fine."

Neville couldn't help but believe her. Harry was worry enough.

Their portkeys activated and Neville sat through the travel, ducking as soon as his feet were under him once more, hiding himself in the shadows. On either side, Remus and James shot a look at him, and turned back to eyeing the building. They, too, had crouched behind cover immediately. It was as small as Regulus had said, two stories and quite insubstantial and unassuming. There was an oubliette underneath, with several cells and a large, open room that was used for meetings. They were hoping there wasn't going to be anyone there. If there were, it was a suicide mission. Of course, they'd be just as screwed if Harry wasn't there, but Neville trusted Luna. He had to.

"Isn't there a spell to check for heat signatures?" Neville whispered. He'd read several of his father's Auror books. His memory served him well on it; James immediately perked and cast, waiting several minutes before breathing carefully.

"I didn't get a measure of downstairs but if there was a large group, I'd have seen it. Upstairs has at least four people; two guards are stationed outside. There are two small signatures on the main floor. Those are very possibly house elves."

"Six people, maybe as many as ... fifteen then?" Remus asked.

"Yes."

"So between the two- sorry, three of us, that should be marginally challenging."

"We could take out the sentries now." Neville offered. "If we're silent, there'll be no alarm, and we'll only have to deal with the people inside."

Also, any alarm wards would read less people, so if someone checks them it won't be suspicious."

"Alarm wards still read people who are unconscious, Neville." James scolded.

"I said take them out." Neville returned coldly. "The wards don't read the dead."

James and Remus went silent for a long moment, and then Remus sniffed the air faintly. "James, there's possibly a werewolf here."

"Luna already verified that." Neville snapped. He didn't like being ignored, and James and Remus were being squeamish. He might be a little trigger-happy, but dammit – that was his best friend. His best friend, suffering what he'd only been dealt a taste of. His only comfort was that he'd killed Bellatrix himself, so he knew she couldn't touch him – but there were a lot more Death Eaters than just her.

"I mean to say I faintly know this smell." Remus shook his head and continued, half growling. "If a werewolf is negotiating with Voldemort, it's likely Greyback. James, let's just take out the sentries. I want Harry out of there."

James nodded, and then hesitated. "I'm still shaky. I'm not sure I can manage that too well –"

"Oh, just stop." Neville growled. "I'll do it." He got up and moved back, slipping through the trees before turning back to look at Remus. Remus glanced at him sadly, and then nodded and moved slowly to the other side, towards the second sentry. Neville moved back to his side, and he saw James moving along in his wake, not moving to overtake him, but following. Neville didn't mind; James had more experience, and he would likely stop him if he were about to make a stupid mistake. Like kill somebody.

Should it bother him he was so willing to kill?

The sentry was standing five feet from the forest, sidelong to a very dark shadow Neville's dark brown robes faded nicely against. He was

a little worried about his paler hair, but not much so, and he was easily prepared to cast once he felt certain nobody would see the spell through the window. He'd want something with a less than flashy signature; red, or brilliant green were out – he doubted he could use the Killing Curse on anybody not actively attacking him anyways. If he aimed right, though, Alan's dark cutting curse should do the job. A silencing spell before, and then the other to his throat ...

Neville breathed out and slid back turning to James.

"Could you silence him? I can do the coup de grace, but two spells in a row might ruin my aim. I'm not sure he'll die immediately." Neville cursed as his voice trembled slightly – he'd killed before, why was this bothering him? – but James seemed mollified at his disquiet, and nodded easily, taking aim. Neville moved forward again, and straightened against the tree, his wand held loosely at his shoulder. Just a small movement, and ...

James' spell skirted the ground to find the man's ankle. He looked down, and opened his mouth before staring into the forest. It was the perfect opening; Neville silently cast the dark purple spell, and the man's head was cleanly severed from his shoulders. He felt a tremor in his hands as the leaves crumpled, and James had to shake his shoulder to get his attention. Neville turned away from his Godfather's sad eyes, and asked,

"Where do we hide the body?"

James sighed, and helped him lose the body in the foliage, and then they moved behind the house, to meet up with Remus. Remus was already there, standing and watching the shadows move in the light of the upper windows. Neville felt a moment's temptation to launch a fireball in there – it would be ridiculously easy to trap them, even a bludgeoning curse could kill the idiots too close – but he knew they had to get Harry out and a burning building would be too much of a beacon. Now, afterwards the idea had merit ...

"Is the other sentry dead?" James nodded to Remus' question, and then Remus turned to indicate the large window. "There's no one in that room, and the far corner here is where Regulus said the trapdoor

was. Could you use the body heat spell from here, or better in the room?"

"In the room, I can get a better measure on the ground floor. Someone may have gone upstairs, though, or downstairs."

"Once we get Harry out, we could blast the wall and run." Neville growled. "Once we're out of the wards, the portkey can take us back to Headquarters."

James frowned at him again. "And how does this plan include in Harry's likely condition?"

Neville blinked. "Oh. We never did tell you our animagi, did we? I'm an Arabian stallion."

Remus chuckled. "That would work quite well, if you think you can carry me and Harry through that forest fast enough to escape the Death Eaters."

Neville eyed the forest. "James is good at that, I could just follow him. If his rack can get through, I probably can."

James nodded. "Alright. I'll presume we're walking through the back door?"

"Vanishing the window looks tempting, but it's probably warded." Remus agreed.

"And if the door is locked?" Neville snidely remarked. "The front door should be less warded."

"Ahh, but it probably rings a bell or something." Remus noted. "This ... I have studied."

Neville pouted. "What did you do, walk up and break his neck? We had to plan and wait for him to move into place."

Remus coloured slightly. "Actually yes."

Neville blinked slowly and just mouthed, ‘oh’, before waiting for Remus to finish disarming the door. Apparently there were a few benefits to being a werewolf aside from the large detriment of going insane once a month.

“There.” Remus whispered. “We’re in.”

The door swung open smoothly upon a small hallway with a rolling door leading into the sitting room. The other end opened on the kitchen. They moved quickly out and into the sitting room, where they crouched behind the couch in the corner Regulus had reported the trapdoor to be and waited as James quickly cast the heat spell both above and below.

“Five above, two below.” He answered softly. “Below, the two are far apart. I’d say one might be in another area of the dungeon if Regulus hadn’t said that main room was so wide. I’m still not sure.”

“Harry wouldn’t be anywhere but below, would he?” Neville whispered. “Luna said he was below ground, and if this place was searched, they could miss theoubliette.” Neville turned aside and ran his hand over the edge of the rug before tugging it up. “If I’m wrong, it’s easier to knock out two people than five, right?”

“Indeed. Let me go first, please?” Remus asked. Neville acquiesced. Remus eased the trap door open, and then slid down. Neville waited for the silence to continue, and then followed. James came after him and pulled down the trapdoor, bringing the rug with it to cover it as best he could.

It was pitch black, but up ahead were torches casting minimal light. Neville glanced around. They were in a wide hallway leading past a wall of stone at least ten metres long. A door was placed about three metres from the far end, wide open. Remus’ lips were curled, but when Neville opened his mouth to ask he put his finger to his lips and indicated the door. He wouldn’t have sent him were anyone near, but Neville still walked lightly to the wall and then sidled up to it before glancing inside and halting.

He'd never seen so much blood. He felt dizzy, but swallowed hard and suppressed it. There was nobody in there; nothing but a table with shackles on the corners. He didn't want to begin to speculate what it could be used for, but clearly it was multipurpose – there were also shackles on each leg. Neville swallowed hard again, and turned away, shaking his head. James and Remus came up, and Remus growled faintly. James looked at him; Remus merely nodded. James' face went white. Neville could guess why. Remus had probably confirmed the blood was Harry's. Neville stepped away feeling faint. The blood earlier hadn't bothered him this much, maybe because it wasn't his friend's. Hell, he hadn't even been half this disturbed when the guy's head came off, or when he'd crushed Bellatrix's skull, but this...

The corner came up and James and Remus ushered him back. Remus waved his hand in a circle and Neville nodded. That was signal they'd gone over – it meant that if spells started flying, Neville was to raise the strongest shield he could around them. It meant he also got to stand back and not see what they were doing or seeing, which was maddening. He got a good clue when Remus growled again. Finally, after several minutes, Remus raised his hand flat – 'stay'. Neville bit his lip as he obeyed, James skirting around the corner and out of sight.

It felt like a long wait but he knew it couldn't be. It finally ended, and Remus waved him forward. Neville came at a faint run, and followed Remus as he headed straight across the room for the far corner. James called out, his voice thready, "The manacles are locked. Is there a key?"

Remus growled negatively, but Neville had seen several keys in the room along the front. He wanted to see Harry first, though; Remus was good at breaking spells, right?

He arrived and winced, staring. Harry was bloody from head to toe, hanging loosely in the shackles and shivering. His flesh was ridged with cuts. James placed his hands on Harry's chin, murmuring softly, but Harry's eyes remained closed and he whimpered faintly. Neville had to look away. Seeing James' distress made it ten times worse. There was a large, throne-like chair on a raised dais; Neville went

over and was surprised to find a key sitting on the arm. There was blood on the metal, and on the stone arm. Maybe they'd left in a hurry? If that was so ...

Neville picked up the key and jogged back over. Remus was frowning at the manacles until Neville thrust the key into his sight. He blinked.

"Are you sure this is the one?"

"Someone left it on the arm of that throne. Maybe they left in a hurry."

Remus frowned, but accepted the key. "That is very possible. This ... the blood smells really fresh."

"He's still bleeding." James softly added. His voice sounded strained. "He won't stop bleeding."

That worried him. Neville's distress fled as he quickly checked Harry's wrists, throat and legs. It was hard to find the particular spots he remembered – he'd spent a long time dwelling on them not half a year before, but there was so much blood... The proclivity had been unhealthy then, but he remembered each of them quite well; still, he found no deep cuts at all. However, all of them - the light, numerous cuts all over - were still bleeding. James was right: Harry's bleeding wasn't stopping. From the sheer volume, it was dangerous. Neville wasn't surprised he was incoherent with so much blood loss. Potions had to have been used; there simply couldn't be that much blood to the human body normally.

Remus quickly summoned their attention again, and James strangely backed off. Neville stepped up to hold Harry while Remus opened the other manacle, and then Harry was slumped against him. Neville brushed his hand over Harry's forehead, spreading aside blood. Neville growled, and then he saw Remus staring at Harry's back with a furious look. Neville looked down the black bruising and bleeding – he'd apparently be whipped, which wasn't surprising. What would Remus be pissed about?

Neville ran his hand down Harry's hair, and then found ragged punctures in his neck. Neville glanced down and found bite marks,

human bite marks. A second look brought doubt; Neville didn't think someone's teeth could pierce flesh so cleanly.

Remus growled. Neville looked up and felt a shiver run down his back. Of course. He'd forgotten Remus had said there had been a werewolf here. Well, shit.

"Remus." Neville spoke up. "Remus."

Remus snapped out of it, glanced up at Neville, and then turned to James. James also was somewhat stunned, and he quickly woke him up. James shook himself, and looked up at Neville again.

"Let Remus take Harry. He's got the most arm strength. We want to use as few spells as possible. It lessens the chance of it being noticed. Come on."

Neville ran his hand over Harry's hair again, and then let Remus take him. Harry murmured quietly as he was moved, and then abruptly started struggling, whimpering and pushing against Remus. Remus tried to calm him.

"Harry, Harry it's me, it's Remus. C'mon Harry, calm down; calm yourself."

Neville caught Harry's wrists. "Harry, stop you're being foolish. Let your Slytherin out and wake up, look around you. C'mon Harry you silly Prongslet, it's Nev."

His friend blinked several times before he actually focused on them. Well, one eye did. Neville felt sick at the deep cut seeping fluid on his right eye. He looked terrified, possibly so distraught he didn't notice, and rasped, "Moony? Where's Padfoot and Prongs? I ... I kept seeing Wormtail. Where's Brownclaw?"

Remus growled angrily when Harry mentioned Wormtail, but Neville stroked his hair.

"Harry, it's all fine. Prongs is scouting the way out, and Padfoot and Brownclaw stayed home. Wormtail will get his; don't worry. It's Neville here, alright? Tiernan Longbottom."

Remus finally managed to speak again. "Prongslet, will you let me carry you? We need to get out quickly."

Harry blinked and shuddered, his right eye squinting shut. "What if Lucius or ... or Fenrir come back?"

Remus frowned. "Harry, Lucius is dead."

Harry curled against him and found the strength to be irritated. "Then I got buggered by a dead man. He's alive, okay? I doubt an inferius could do magic."

Remus' grip tightened, but he closed his eyes and got a hold of himself. "Alright. We'll keep an eye out for him. We need to leave."

"Watch for the snake, then." Harry murmured, slipping back unconscious in Remus' arms. "I'm really not up to it."

Neville found himself smiling oddly despite the situation. He walked before Remus as they made their way back to the hallway and the ladder where James was waiting. He walked over to Remus as he came closer and stroked Harry's hair. "What took you?"

"He woke up some, and fought against me holding him. I think he was reacting to me being a werewolf. He also told us to look out for Lucius and a snake."

"Lucius is dead." James pointed out quietly. "Aurors found him dead. "

"Apparently they were either wrong, or they were paid off." Remus shrugged. "Harry is certain it was him."

James nodded, pensive. "I think I re-killed him. I'd thought that blond hair looked familiar."

Remus nodded slowly, and Neville glanced around the room. Harry's snake warning had struck him more than the warning against Lucius. Lucius – well, Death Eaters - they'd be watching for naturally. A snake ... a snake worried him. You normally didn't watch for a snake.

"Can we get upstairs?" Neville quickly asked. "We need to get out of here."

James and Remus both nodded, and James climbed up the stairs first, pushing open the trap door. He paused, and then crawled through, waving them after. Neville went next, and then Remus used mobilicorpus to lift Harry through. James caught him and pulled him behind the couch with him as Remus quickly crawled up and closed the door, returning the rug to its place. Remus lifted his head – and froze.

"Harry said to watch for a snake, didn't he?" Remus breathed. "That is the biggest snake I've ever seen."

"Shit." Neville swore. "We need to leave. Now." It wasn't in the room, thank Merlin, but it was just outside the door, moving away – it's tail passed by as they watched. However, Neville didn't want something thicker than his thigh finding them. It was the scariest thing he'd seen in ages.

Remus nodded and quickly took Harry from James. James moved back to check the door and swore. "It's locked again. How are we to get out?"

Neville grinned bitterly. "Does my plan sound a bit better yet?"

James and Remus glanced at each and shrugged. "How do you plan on accomplishing it?"

"Brace me. That stupid spell of yours kicks like a sonuvabitch."

James smiled awkwardly and stood ready for the spell. Neville cast and slammed into him, moaning. That spell hurt. However, the wall hadn't smashed as he'd hoped. It had certainly cracked though, and the people upstairs were milling around. Remus was aiming his wand

at the door and Neville quickly cast Porrybaxter's – he could raise it quicker than the Greenhorn Wall, and bring it down faster. It could also be cast through from inside, and didn't distract him.

"James, brace me again. They're not getting in yet."

James frowned and did so; Neville tried for the wall again. More boards smashed; the ceiling groaned, but it wasn't open yet. Neville felt light-headed, and then James cast past him. A small chunk blew out, and Remus joined, smashing open a large hole. James picked several more pieces out; he then turned and threw another blasting curse into the Death Eaters. Judging by his hissed, "Yes!" he was most pleased to be able to cause havoc from behind Neville's shield.

"James!" Remus called. "We're through; put the fox in the henhouse. I'll get myself and Harry on Neville, and then you need to run out and lead, alright?"

Neville held his spinning head and swore. "I may not be able to navigate the forest, but I can hold a basic shield while running if we take the drive out the front past the wards."

Remus nodded, and jumped out with Harry in hand. Neville stepped up to it, "James, I'm out."

"Right." James called. "I'll lead you out the drive, then?"

"Yes."

"Get out there. I've got a few words to pass along."

"Watch the snake, James." Neville reminded as he jumped out, changing quickly and trotting over to Remus. Remus hefted Harry up onto his back, and then climbed up after, tucking his legs against him and holding onto his mane with one hand, Harry with the other.

Shortly thereafter, a stag launched itself out the hole and darted around the building. Neville took off after him, concentrating on the strongest shield he could manage. It was already giving him a headache. He had a good stride, nearly keeping pace with the

leaping stag that was James, Remus gripping him tightly with his legs. They crossed the front of the house and Neville saw the long, immense snake casually laid across the front lawn, several metres long and thicker than a snake should ever get. James leaped over her, and Neville ran up and jumped as well. Someone behind him screamed furiously, and as he lifted, Nagini struck at him. Remus swore; she was long enough-

A flash of green light and Nagini exploded. Neville didn't think that was normal, but another horrified scream went up and it wasn't Remus. Neville landed and raced for the edge of the wards. He didn't have time to wonder. James was just at the brink – and disappeared. Remus gasped, "Left!" – Neville twisted, pounded the ground as he strove onwards, and then felt something twist at his guts before he stumbled, changing back abruptly and ending up with Harry groaning on top of him, Remus staggering for balance.

Neville distractedly stared in front of himself and then growled inanely, "Wall. Bad." What was one doing inches from his nose? And why did his shoulder hurt?

Harry was quickly taken away, but Neville was pulled up and into a warm embrace before he could really register where he was. His mother stroked his hair over and over again, and finally breathed, "God, Neville, I was so worried."

Frank laughed behind her, a forced sound but from what Neville could see he was honestly pleased. "I see someone never told us when he finished the extracurricular lesson we assigned."

"It was very useful." Remus nodded. "And I need to go curse something into oblivion. Frank, would you please spar with me?"

Frank curiously followed, clearly ready to pepper him with questions. Neville just leaned on his mother's shoulder – he was calming down, and started to feel sore and tired. The stress was getting to him.

"Neville, are you alright?" Alice asked worriedly.

"Where's Harry?" He asked distantly.

"Regulus took him by portkey straight to Potter Mansion where Poppy was waiting. James went with him; Lily was already there. We'll be going back to our place until we get the word we can visit. Neville, please look at me." Neville stepped back obediently and watched her face. She looked firm, and he made a note to pay attention. She gave her lessons with that face, not teases. "You aren't going to be seeing him for a few days, Neville, unless he specifically asks for you. If he doesn't, you can't complain about it."

Neville opened his mouth to speak and then shut it. She was right. And he wasn't going to like it. He closed his eyes against the thought and an image of Harry's bloody body invaded his mind. He choked and jerked backwards. He stopped abruptly as Alice caught his arm and he swore under his breath. A telling sign was that Alice didn't correct him – just because he learned his language from her didn't mean she quite approved. She gently pulled him back to her shoulder and held his head.

"I'm sorry you had to go Neville."

"I asked for it." Neville reminded her. She moved to say more soft words and Neville cut her off with the brusque question, "Why does Harry's state haunt me more than killing? I've killed two people – Bellatrix, and the sentry – and the only thing that bothers me is that Harry was hurt so badly, and all the blood in the dungeon. The blood didn't disturb me when the sentry died, why does it bother me that so much was in the dungeon? Does it being my friend's make that much of a difference?"

"Neville." Alice softly crooned. "Yes, it makes a big difference. I never wanted this for you, never wanted you to see such things."

"You can't change it, mother." He bit out. "This is war."

"I know, Neville, I know. I never wanted you to see war, but it's thrown itself in your face. I – I can only hope it isn't here for my grandchildren. I can only hope, because I never wanted it for my children."

"I don't want them to see it either." Neville murmured. "I'll pay the price so they won't have to, mother."

Alice didn't answer. She held him and Neville didn't pull away. He wasn't going to let her see him crying over this. He wasn't supposed to cry over this. Why couldn't he make up his mind? He shouldn't be so disturbed over such a little thing, over his friend and not the killing. Why was it so confusing?

He wasn't sure if he was feeling his mother's tears on his shoulder or not.

A/N: There we go. Back in Britain. Back in trouble. I hope I didn't scar any of you too badly, but hey! I need to add some stress, and wasn't it nice of me not to cut you off just as he disappeared? I could've been far more cruel.

Well, here's the beginning of sixth year. As you can tell, it's going to be all kinds of cheery.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty

Alan leaned against the back of the bookshelf in the secret passage to the sitting room, not bothering with any light. He was back in Spinner's End with his father, Severus, and he wasn't happy about it.

He wasn't eavesdropping; he was just keeping out of sight because he didn't want to talk. Severus had actually gotten a letter earlier while he'd been getting lunch, but as he had said nothing to Alan about it, Alan hadn't pried no matter how much he'd wanted to. Severus had looked thoroughly startled, though. Alan considered where he would look in order to find the correspondence after Severus finished reading through it. He wasn't too curious though; he hadn't been curious about much of anything recently.

Knocking sounded at the far end of the passage, and Severus irritably called down, "Alan, are you hiding in here again?"

If he didn't answer, Severus would shine light down and possibly invade. Alan sighed and called back, "No. I'm not."

"Don't you snipe at me, Alan, I'm not in the mood. You have a visitor."

"Tell them I'm not interested."

Severus murmured something out of the passage, and then called back down. "I don't think your visitor is going to listen."

"You're the Potions professor, pull off your bat impression." Alan snapped back. "I don't want to talk to anyone."

Severus simply went away, and Alan returned to brooding. He succeeded for about fifteen seconds before someone lightly ran down the stairs. Alan looked up, ready to give them a piece of his mind, and failed miserably as the thought derailed under an assault of warm, soft flesh and a questing tongue.

Vengeance got put on a back burner until his mind got back on track.

Luna brought that about several minutes later as she just as abruptly pulled back, licked his cheek and idly added, "You do need to stop brooding, you know. You get very boring that way and nothing gets done."

Alan sighed, leaning his head down to touch her crown. "Luna, I hate it when you do that."

"Get you worked up and rain on your parade?" She answered lightly, as though it hadn't been purposeful on her part.

"Quite." He returned, his tone just as pleasant as hers, but with an edge she'd never had promising painful death ... to anyone but her, at least. "I really am not in the mood for company."

"Are you aware Harry is feeling more up to company recently?"

"No, despite my father's large part in healing him. He hasn't told me word one about Harry's condition and flatly refuses to do so." Alan growled.

"Probably because you're brooding."

Alan gritted his teeth. "Luna, I wouldn't be 'brooding' if someone would just tell me something."

Luna's voice became flat. "You were brooding before Harry got tortured, and you know it. What are you brooding about?"

Alan straightened. Luna didn't take a flat tone with him unless she was pissed off. Alan rubbed his neck and answered, perfectly willing to give as good as he got. "And is it any of your business, Luna?"

"Certainly, Mr. It's-My-Job-To-Save-The-World. Get off your pedestal and hobnob with the rest of us, rather than hailing your superior concerns as none of our business."

"I am not on a pedestal, Luna!" Alan snapped. "You just don't understand. You're not getting people killed!"

“In case you hadn’t noticed, nobody’s died yet!”

“There were plenty of bodies at the Department of Mysteries.”

“Yes, in white masks. Who cares about them when none of your friends are dead?”

“Is torture any better?”

“Harry will be fine.”

“Neville-“

“Is already getting over it. Blaise healed; Neville healed; Ginny got over it; Harry and James healed, Regulus is doing quite well considering.” If he could see her, he could only imagine she’d have her hands on her hips, glaring at him. “Why are you so concerned?”

“Luna, the war isn’t over yet, and everyone is still a target because of me.”

“That’s the biggest load I’ve heard since the Ministry claimed to possess a collective brain that didn’t work on Sbappurpod shit.”

Alan couldn’t help but snort. “Luna, you don’t get it –“ He didn’t finish; Luna abruptly slapped him, and then turned around and stalked up several steps before stopping again; it was so dark he was more focused on sound, what little she made.

“Do not treat me like a child. Alan, does anyone’s decision lie with you but your own?”

“No …” Alan answered quietly, trying to determine how angry he was at that. She’d slapped him, but it was Luna … He couldn’t just hit Luna back, but Merlin was it tempting.

“Do you think you could have made anyone go along with you if they didn’t want to?”

“I never made them do anything, Luna –“

“Hah!” She cheered. “You said it yourself! How is it your fault if you didn’t do anything?”

“I let them near me –“

“Oh, we need your permission, do we?”

“No –“

“So you do control us.”

“Luna,” Alan growled, “I already said no to that.”

“How is it your fault?”

“If you would just listen,”

“Fine.” She shifted faintly in the sound of fabric; Alan suspected she’d sat down on the stairs. “Enlighten me.” She was outright daring him, but he had to try. She just didn’t get it ...

“Luna, it’s dangerous simply to be my friend. It’s dangerous to know me, much less be close to me. Anyone around me is in danger, and I can’t change that and I hate it.” He sounded like he was whining as he finished, but, dammit, it was true.

“Okay.” Luna cheerfully agreed. “Is that it?”

“Luna,” Alan irritably ran his hand through his hair and felt himself swear under his breath again. “Luna, I don’t want to be a liability.”

Luna sighed lightly. “Alan, suppose you don’t exist. Poof, you’re gone. How many of your friends would still be in this war right now?”

Alan paused and tried to think for a moment. “Um, everyone, but Luna if I didn’t exist thousands of things would be different, wouldn’t they? There was so much dependent on me ...”

"Most things wouldn't change; someone else would just take your place." Luna dismissed the notion casually. "As it stands, though, you said everyone would still be in trouble."

"Harry wouldn't have been tortured," Alan added waspishly.

"Wrong." Luna coldly announced. "Harry would. Department of Mysteries: Harry stood clean in Voldemort's face and wouldn't back down. That made him a target in and of himself." Alan opened his mouth to insist he'd led him there, but Luna poked him in the belly – he hadn't known she'd stood. "And secondly, his parents made him a target first by defying the Dark Lord. You remember – Harry was another candidate for that lovely prophecy. Same as Neville. Neville's a target without you as well, because of his parents and his sass. If nothing else, he is a target for his strength, same as Harry. Same as you would be, stripped of name and history and prophecy. You are not at fault."

Alan knew she was right, but he still didn't feel any better. "Luna, I'm still ..."

"Hopeless, then." Luna finished airily, clearly exasperated. "Fine. I'll come back later. Bye, Alan!" She chirped, and skipped lightly up the stairs. Strangely enough, her leaving left Alan feeling more downtrodden than before, and he popped open the lower door to go sulk in his room. He'd glance over ... whatever had held his attention before later. Much later, after his mind made more sense.

Alan snorted. Good luck with that.

||||

Harry was standing in the front Hall, leaning against the new wall where Mrs. Black's portrait had been, and just waiting in silence as the meeting went on downstairs. The rest of the children were in the sitting room: Ginny had said something about talking Ron into challenging Alan to a game of chess again, and Nanna was probably upstairs talking with Melanie and Luna. Normally, he'd go cheer Alan on, but right now he wanted to be alone.

Absently, he rubbed his wrists, feeling the soft bandages over the remaining bruises. Severus had explained that one: it was one of several of the curses he'd been hit with. His blood wasn't clotting properly, so cuts and bruises took ages to stop bleeding, to stop spreading and finally heal. Severus had, with false optimism, told him it should go back to normal in a few weeks or so, provided he remembered to drink the potions on time. Harry didn't begrudge him his attitude. He hadn't been exactly agreeable once he'd stopped flinching every time someone addressed him. Four days...

Harry ran his hand through his hair and sighed, avoiding the strap holding the eye-patch in place. As he closed his free eye, his chest tightened and he began to gasp for air. Burning pain raced across his chest; his arms began to tingle and his gut twisted agonizingly. Someone reached around and grabbed his throat – his head was pulled back and he took breath to scream –

Harry fell to his knees and abruptly focused on the carpet. He swore, digging his fingers into the pile and gritting his teeth. Again. Another flashback. It wouldn't be so bad if it didn't happen randomly, without warning, and if his limbs would just stop trembling. It was over.

"Harry, are you alright?"

Nanna trotted down the stairs and crouched next to him – after he'd cursed Severus several times for touching him when he was edgy, with his nerves so damn sensitive, no one else tried it – and Harry changed from whispering his curses to thinking them. He felt embarrassed and ashamed and fought back the feelings. She was only concerned. "I'm fine, Nanna. Just shaky. I'll get up in a minute."

Nanna made a soft agreeing noise and stood, stepping back up the stairs. Harry rocked onto his heels and watched her go, listening to her argue quietly with Ginny.

"... stupid idea, he's not up to it ..."

"Have you asked ... doubt that's going to affect anything. You're too soft ..."

“Don’t say that! … not a single word, you haven’t seen …”

“ … fine and dandy, girl, you don’t coddle them …”

A wry smile twisted his lips, and finally Harry spoke up, “I can half hear you down here. If you’re discussing me, it’s more useful to actually ask before you speculate.”

Ginny gave Nanna a triumphant look, and she trotted downstairs to stand nearby. Harry quickly levered himself to standing. He’d been short long enough to want to stand and enjoy the inch he’d put on over the summer. He’d had enough people towering over him…

Abruptly he had to put his hand on the wall to stop himself from swaying. His skin remembered being chafed by a large chest covered in thick, rough hair. He let the shudder wash over him, and sighed hard. “Okay, sorry about that.”

“It’s alright, Harry.” Ginny softly answered. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Harry scoffed. “You weren’t too concerned up there; I’m the one to judge what I feel up to or not.” I am so glad I have little in the way of body hair. He could definitely live without that reminder. Fenrir had had enough to make a small animal out of. Then again, he was a werewolf. He found himself chuckling softly, and shook his head slowly. Yeah, laugh at it. Denial, denial – shut up, Harry. Ginny’s talking. “Sorry, what did you say?”

Ginny gave him another worried look, and repeated herself. “Alan’s been brooding for the past few days. Luna says he’s convinced he’s a liability and responsible for everything and all his friend’s injuries.”

“Brat, trying to take all the credit.” Harry pouted. Ginny smiled awkwardly back, and continued,

“I was hoping you could tell him where to get off. Luna tried, but he stubbornly didn’t listen to her. We were hoping he might listen to you better.”

Harry shrugged, and nodded slowly. “Just give me a minute. Brain’s feeling a bit scrambled again.”

“Would you like a spoon?” Nanna asked cheerfully.

“Hardy har har.” Harry chuckled out. “No, thank you. The pitchfork works just fine. Is Alan still losing to Ron?”

“Last I saw.” Ginny nodded.

Harry nodded and strolled in, smiling wryly. It was something else to concentrate on, at least. Better than thinking. Thinking kept going back on itself, back to four days ago – “Alan, are you losing to a Gryffindor again?”

Alan glanced up, startled, and then back down. After regarding the board, he answered plainly, “Yeah. Ron’s still winning.”

“Good work, Ron.” Harry cheered, and quickly pulled a chair over, sitting down to watch the last few moves of the game. When Ron checkmated Alan with the few remaining pieces, Harry stood up. “Hey, Alan, walk with me.”

Alan looked at him curiously, but stood up and thanked Ron for the game. Ron grinned: Alan was the only challenge he knew. He followed Harry out and upstairs to Alan’s room. Most of the rooms were empty, now, as the houses were warded again and everyone felt safe enough in their own homes. The children were brought so as to not leave them alone without an adult. Either way, it ensured privacy, as Harry didn’t want to be lecturing Alan in front of everyone. He looked back over at his friend and found Alan’s face twisted with regret. Irritably, Harry stood.

“What’s eating you, Alan?” His tone was purposefully light.

“I’m just … I’m sorry.” Alan quietly offered. He shuffled his feet and looked to the side.

“What on earth do you have to be sorry for?” Harry demanded, leaning back against the footboard. “What have you done?”

"They wouldn't have targeted you if you weren't my friend!" Alan growled. "I'm a liability, and I'm sick of it, but I can't change it, and now everyone's a target because of me!"

Harry glared at Alan; Alan abruptly stopped and looked confused before Harry growled out, "Fuck – Off – Alan. And get over yourself."

"What?"

"I said fuck off." Harry repeated carefully, his face hard. "Because you forgot your brain somewhere, and I'm not in the mood to listen to you whine."

"Excuse me?" Alan gaped. "I'm not whining, Harry."

"You are. You sound like a ruddy Gryffindor, Alan. How about I just take your dorm and you can listen to Ron snore all evening, hm?" Alan was silent now, but he looked ready to put his back up, so Harry shot him down again. "I'm sick and tired of people making excuses for what happened to me. 'It could happen to anyone', 'it was a fluke', 'it shouldn't have happened'." Harry grimaced. "Well, mate, it did happen. And you want to know why it happened?" Harry growled, pushing off and stalking up to stare up at Alan, ignoring the shiver down his back, glaring as best he could with one eye covered. "It's because Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy and Antonin Dolohov and Fenrir Greyback are all fucking sadists looking for a piece of meat to get off on and I just happened to be it. It's not your fault, it's not mine, and it's not my parents. Whatever blame exists lands firmly on them, and if I have to listen to someone say it's their fault again I'm going to throttle them."

He fought down the desire to tremble, and thought he'd lose until Alan opened his mouth again.

"Harry, I'm –"

Oh, that apologetic tone again. Harry stepped back and backhanded Alan, pulling himself straight out of the brink of another flashback, pulling Alan's attention back to him.

"Alan, shut up already. How many people are going to have to tell you it's not your fault? How many times do we need to remind you that you never had any influence on our decisions? Alan," Harry lowered his voice and just gave Alan a frustrated look. Alan had straightened, hand to his smarting cheek, but he wasn't as angry as Harry had expected and he waited on the end of the less reprimanding tone Harry had taken on. Heartened, Harry continued, "Alan, we're worried about you. You're taking on too much blame. It's not very Slytherin," Harry offered slyly, "and it's not going to serve you with the shit that got dumped on your shoulders. Stop trying to take on more responsibility than you have to. It's ridiculous."

Alan smiled weakly, and nodded without a word. Harry grinned happily and finished,

"Besides, if you kept on that vein, we'd have started cursing you in order to seriously get the point across."

Alan laughed, "Alright, alright. I'll remember that. I'm not allowed to take any credit for you and the rest of my friends being jackasses in their own right. After getting slapped three times, I think I get it."

"Three times?" Harry asked curiously. "Ginny only mentioned Luna slapping you."

"End of last year. I got pissed off and called the girls whores in a show of stupidity and Melanie slapped me. Of course, this was after I'd had a shoe thrown at me for the third time that day."

Harry blinked. "Okay, I guess I was slightly wrong. You are enough of an ass to have it leak out to those around you, but it's still not significant enough to make us that kind of target."

Alan smiled weakly. "Fair enough. Um," Alan moved and sat quietly on the bed, looking sidelong at Harry, "if you're done being pissed off can I ask how you're doing without making it worse again?"

Harry blinked and felt his face blank. "Hasn't Severus told you anything?"

"No." Alan growled, turning aside. "Not that was I welcoming it. I spent the last few days brooding."

"That would lead to that." Harry offered, nervous without reason. He sat down on the bed and smoothed the covers beside him. Moments later, Alan moved beside him, and then abruptly pulled his legs up and crossed them, facing him with as open an expression Harry had ever seen on his face. He was concerned, and Harry felt his lips quirking into a smile again as he struggled not to laugh. It would sound hysterical, and he'd found that it really made the people listening disturbed after he'd laughed for almost twenty minutes...

"Harry, what happened?"

"Are you recreating fourth year on purpose?" Harry mused.

Alan blinked. "This is much like it, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Harry quietly answered. "You were right about Dolohov, you know. He's a sadistic bastard; don't know how he kept out of Azkaban. Likes cutting a lot, but he's right terrible at sharing." Harry tilted his head to the side. "Voldemort kinda, 'gave' me to him, because he hauled me in there after the fight. Time feels odd when you're in pain, doesn't it?" Harry felt like he was babbling, and stared blankly at the wall, picking fitfully at the cover. Alan reached over and laid his hand over Harry's. The touch made his blood freeze; the sight of stone splashed with blood covered his vision, his own blood, and someone's hands were pressed painfully against his own, pinning them to the stone as the man, Fenrir, grunted and moaned, chest hair abrading against his already bloody back.

And just as quickly it was gone, he was trembling, and no time had passed. Harry pulled his hand out from Alan's touch and pressed it against his face, breathily continuing the only thought he could remember, "Yeah, time feels odd."

It took him a moment to remember he was answering himself, but Alan echoed him, "It does. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have —"

"It's fine, Alan, really." Harry lowered his hand and closed his eyes until he noticed he was seeing blood on stone against his eyelids, and he opened them again, backing onto the bed and turning to face Alan, leaning back against the footboard. "Everyone's so cautious."

"Do you want them inciting memories all the time just because your body can't forget the pain?" Alan asked lightly. Harry couldn't help but smile. "Harry, please. Have you told anyone what happened?"

"My mother and father. Poppy." Harry answered immediately.

"Did you really tell it, Harry?"

Harry looked down. He knew what Alan meant. "Not really." He whispered. "To mum, maybe, but to Poppy and dad ... it was just a recitation."

"Please, Harry. Share it with me?"

Harry ducked his head. He'd asked the same of Alan. Alan knew what it was like. Hell, Alan knew what the Death Eaters liked even. Harry leaned his head back and sighed. "I'm surprised Narcissa allows Lucius to keep that cane in the house with what all he does with it." Harry offered calmly.

Alan winced. "He didn't ..."

"He did."

"Oh, ow." Alan offered. After a moment, he continued, "Gross. How can he eat after touching that ..."

"The blood must be Hell to get off." Harry offered, pushing away the self-disgust that tried to rise. Alan didn't mean it that way, and he knew it. "It's funny when the Death Eaters look so foiled when Voldemort tells them to back off. Dolohov pouted like a two year old when Fenrir walked by."

"Fenrir?"

"You haven't heard of him?" Harry asked incredulously. "He's a werewolf. He relishes blood; he places himself near a settlement every full moon. He probably takes wolfsbane just to be able to be more precise in his attacks, if he even does so." Harry shivered. "Voldemort was considering ... giving me to him as payment for services rendered."

Alan blinked. "He wanted to turn you?"

"I think he was more interested in fucking me, actually." Harry spat. "Good thing Lycanthropy isn't sexually transmitted."

Alan paled and swallowed before he could speak, his voice weak. "That is always good... I know for a fact it isn't; there have been studies."

"Yeah, Remus knew the same. Although," Harry smiled, "he had to answer a half hour after he heard what Greyback did because he left to go destroy something." Harry shrugged. "He's apparently very territorial about me and my sister, and Neville and his too."

Alan chuckled. "I wouldn't want to be Greyback if Remus is half as creative as your father and godfather."

"He's worse." Harry offered. "He gets ideas from them and then actually manages to accomplish them perfectly because he's such a bookworm."

Alan smiled. "So, Dolohov and then Fenrir?"

"That was the night of. They left me alone around morning, gave me water I suspect was laced with sleeping and healing potions – I've been checked, Alan, stop panicking."

"What if there was poison?" Alan demanded.

"What do you think, Alan?" Harry asked bitterly back. Alan was silent for a long moment and then subsided. "I didn't think there would be, what with Voldemort's announcement of attempting to break the son of the Potters. Your father and Poppy checked for everything. I got off

easy; there're only two or three curses I'm going to have to wait out. Haemophilia and hypersensitivity." Harry answered. "The other wore off yesterday or the day before, else I wouldn't be walking today."

"Hypersensitivity?" Alan asked cautiously. "I know haemophilia is a lack of blood clotting, but ..."

Harry rubbed his arms cautiously. "It basically means I really don't want people touching me much. Sometimes it feels like normal, and sometimes it goes off the deep end and hurts, or ... sometimes it feels really damn good for no reason, but if it's feeling like that it's one moment from feeling goddamn painful. Or maybe I'm getting the curse and the torture mixed up."

"Perfectly understandable." Alan nodded. Harry laughed quietly. "So, what happened after that?"

"I don't know what the timeframe was, but eventually I was hauled out again and ... and it was a large meeting." Harry swallowed, trying to forget seeing rows of Death Eaters, rows of men standing around Voldemort's throne, the manacles hanging to the side, a large open space in front of Voldemort's chair. It didn't take much to figure out he was going to be the main entertainment. Unconsciously, he drew his legs up and folded his hands on his knees. "I don't know how many people there were. Thirty, fifty." He shrugged. "Voldemort just said he was most pleased with their actions that summer, picking everything up, joining him, etc., etc. And then they were all taking turns as he called them up. He'd told them to make an example, but to keep me in one piece." Harry chuckled and put his head on his knees. "You know, every time you start thinking the cruciatus is the worst, you suddenly find someone with an imagination. I suppose mass recruiting is bound to find a few men with brains and ideas. Every time the cruciatus started to feel numb someone would step up with something new that felt horrible on raw nerve endings."

Alan musingly murmured, "You'd think most of those purebloods wouldn't want to get their hands dirty."

Harry choked out a laugh. "You'd think, and, you know, you're probably right, but apparently fucking someone is fine if everyone

else is doing it.” Harry blinked the memories away and shook his head. “It … It wasn’t a lot of them, though, really. It just felt like it, and not a lot actually did much hands on, either … there was just so many of them. And those just hurt so much …” He shook off the thoughts, trying to stop his voice sounding so weak. “Of course, Lucius got in on it too with his cane, but that … that was after the flunkies got sent away and it was just the inner circle. Lucius came out, and at one point I was blindfolded while … more of the same. I think it was someone new, or maybe they were just fucking with my head, but …” Harry blinked, overwhelmed with phantom pains. Inanely, he finished, “It just hurt so much.”

Alan shifted on the bed and hesitantly sat next to him, close, but not touching. Harry was grateful and sent him a smile before cautiously leaning over and resting his head on Alan’s shoulder. He didn’t tend to get a random sensation if he initiated the contact. Severus said it would start to happen less and less as time went by, but that it was still inadvisable to be making out with anyone – erogenous zones were the worst. Harry had absolutely no intentions to test that anytime in the near future, no matter how pretty Susan and Daphne were. He had to deal with the risk of sparking a catfight between them, anyways.

“Your eye?” Alan asked softly, cautiously.

Harry stiffened slightly, and then shrugged. “Voldemort knew I was your friend, Alan. He was making a point, I think. Poppy’s got it healing; it should be good in another few days.”

Alan nodded, remaining silent for a long moment before he offered quietly, “You know, Harry, that Blaise sent out an invitation to all of us.” Harry nodded against his shoulder, and Alan’s voice took on the sound of a smile. “It’s on the twentieth. Most everyone is planning on attending. Do you think you’ll be up to it?”

“I’ll go if it kills me.” Harry smiled as he said it. “They’re all going to need to know, anyways, if it wasn’t in the paper.”

"No details." Alan answered. "They'll know you were taken for a day, though." Alan frowned. "Harry, you know that ... Theodore's father is in the inner circle, right?"

"And so are some of Raina's family." Harry finished quietly. "I don't know about them. The elder Nott didn't do much; he just cursed me several times. They weren't particularly strong. Any of the earlier 'party' could have been anyone. By the evening, when everyone had to leave suddenly ... that was just the inner circle again. I ... wasn't very coherent. They left Fenrir to chain me back up." Harry shuddered. "He wasn't needed amongst the call. I think they were just humouring him by including him. I know Voldemort is courting him for the cause."

Alan nodded slowly. "We should get back downstairs before someone starts to worry."

"About what, you ravishing me? I'm still sore, got that curse problem, and went up here ticked off." Harry grumbled good-naturedly. "Not to mention that Poppy would kill me."

Alan snorted. "Everyone knows make-up sex is the best, really. And some of them might worry about me getting cursed, you know."

"Worry about a Slytherin?" Harry asked. "Who would worry about a Slytherin? It's the Gryffindors everyone cares about."

"That's because everyone is worried about what the Slytherin will hex the Gryffindor with." Alan retorted, holding the door open.

"With good reason." Harry pointed out, nodding as he started down the stairs. Alan caught up easily. "You Slytherins know some downright nasty curses."

"Only for Gryffindors."

Alan aborted a motion towards him and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Harry gave him a brilliant smile and then ran down the stairs for the kitchen; honestly, the meeting should be over. He hit the door and pushed it open, laughing as Alan threw token protests as he tried

to keep up without running Harry over. Once inside, however, every eye fell on him, and abruptly Arthur made a mad grab to gather the papers on the table. One fell to the floor, and Harry rolled his eyes as he picked it up.

“You know, you offered to let me sit in and I turned you down. You don’t have to panic to put the stuff away; none of the girls are following quite yet.” Harry straightened and found the panicked looks irritating. Harry stubbornly flipped the paper over – and froze.

Merlin, he hadn’t thought that they could be so classless as to have a camera, much less a wizarding one. It was Lucius; the blond, straight hair couldn’t be anyone else, and the flickering light was the torches. Harry could even remember the moment; the cane dropped carelessly, the silver snakehead red with blood, and being pulled off the floor to sate the arousal the torture had brought on. He hadn’t been coherent then – his memory could have been one of many similar moments - and the only thought currently entertaining itself even now was, Lucius looks constipated in this, followed by the curious wonder at who on earth was holding the camera? At that point, everyone else had been at what Harry could only assume was a meal, everyone but Voldemort ...

Oh dear.

Harry felt his shoulders begin to shake and he couldn’t help but start chuckling, the sound thin with stress, but still the thought of Voldemort with a camera... The laughter got louder, and he groped for a chair before the mirth got so bad he fell over. If everyone was going to think he was losing it, he was going to maintain at least some dignity and not fall on his arse. Alan was the first to speak, and his dry voice just made Harry laugh harder.

“Okay, what on earth are those pictures of that you’re all looking like you’re choking now that he’s laughing?”

“I don’t believe laughter is the typical reaction to finding a picture of your own torture.” Severus scathingly drawled. “But we all knew Potter was losing it.”

Several complaints were raised, but Harry got himself under control enough to turn and rest his arms on the back of the chair he'd claimed – he was right behind Emmeline Vance, actually, much to her discomfort – and he grinned at Severus, which probably looked more than a little demented with his stress, eye patch, and current context.

"I'm not laughing because it was my torture. I'm laughing because when Lucius was getting his private jollies, the only other person in the room was Voldemort himself. I wasn't so out of it I wouldn't have noticed another person in the room, even if I was oblivious to the camera. So, excuse me but Voldemort using a camera ..." Harry snorted and started laughing again. When he could see again, several moments of silence later, Alan was grinning slightly but still looking pained. Harry very maturely stuck out his tongue. "Oh, stop looking so constipated."

"Well excuse me if I find it extremely unsettling to think of Voldemort doing something so mundane as clicking a picture. What does that look like?" Alan held out his hand and Harry reluctantly handed over the picture. Laughing aside, it was disturbing ...

"Were all those pictures in the same vein as that lovely one of Lucius?" Harry asked.

"Yes, they were." Snape snapped. "And denial is unhealthy, Potter. Stop hiding behind the façade of not caring or you'll never get over this."

Irritably, Harry snatched the picture back from Alan – he wasn't holding it very hard, and looked quite uneasy – and Harry glanced back down at it. Underneath Lucius' sweaty thrusting, Harry could see his own mop of black hair, his head rolling weakly and occasionally showing a glimpse of his eyes gleaming and far too wide as he panted and shuddered. Blood ran down his face; this was before his eye got cut, but he was drunk on pain or drugs. He didn't know which, and it didn't matter much either.

He threw the picture down on the table and smiled tightly. "Yeah, looks like the picture got it about right. I do look half-mad, but then again I doubt you could handle being that close to Lucius without

going a little crazy, now wouldn't you, Severus? Of course, this was after he finished playing with that cane he's obsessed with. I'm just surprised he knows so many charms to use on it so I didn't get permanently harmed – it only felt like silly-putty getting shoved up my arse, rather than hard forged silver. Makes you wonder what he does with it in his spare time. Now," Harry slammed his fists down on the table and glared across at his Potions professor, "if you're done speculating on the state of my mind four days after I got out the company of your former acquaintances, I'll thank you to stop missing those fun little orgies and get back to focusing on the Order or sweetening that tongue of yours, because you bloody well suck at giving advice on holding onto sanity."

Harry stormed out before he said something else he was going to regret. That was a low blow, and he knew it, and chances are he'd probably scarred Molly for life with that little announcement, but honestly. If you ever needed a name for a smothering over-protective she-bear ...

"Harry, are you alright?" Nanna asked. She was standing just inside the sitting room, talking with Ginny, Melanie, and, strangely enough, Luna. Harry hadn't known Luna could come into Grimmauld Place.

"You look like you saw a ghost." Luna lightly offered. "Did you get a ghost wedgie?"

"How ... Nevermind. I'm alright. I just got an unexpected surprise downstairs."

"Ah." Luna smiled. "Ginny told me she asked you to speak to Alan about his brooding." Harry noticed her tone went flatter than normal, and he looked at her curiously. "Did you speak to him?"

"Yes, and it finally got through to him. I believe he said getting slapped three times helped." Tellingly, Melanie blushed slightly. "I also told him he'd probably have ended up hexed if he'd continued on that vein, so I suppose that had some merit too."

"Very true." Luna lilted again. "And you need to go lie down before a kuyptelli nests in your ear. You're off balance, so they're already

flying around there. Best thing for it is a dose of sleep and sweet dreams.”

Harry smiled bitterly. “Then I suppose I’m in a bit of trouble on that front. I don’t have many of those in my future right now.”

“Not even a lady friend might help?” Luna asked innocently.

“No.” Harry’s bitterness deepened. “Not for another few months at any rate. I’ve got this little problem with being hypersensitive. It won’t go away for two or three months yet, and in the meantime I’ve got to deal with the haemophilia.”

“Ah.” Luna sighed. “What’s the eyepatch for?”

Harry touched it and smiled again, another unpleasant smile. “That’s for irony. Goodnight, Luna. Nanna, Melanie, and Ginny. Tell mum I’m kipping on Alan’s old bed and raiding his books. I’m getting jumpy again.”

Nanna nodded willingly, and drew Melanie, Ginny, and Luna into a conversation as Harry went back up the stairs. He was getting another headache, and his body ached despite being nearly healed. He couldn’t tell the memories from the true feeling. Reading distracted him. It also made him forget to panic when he was stuck in a building with a number of people, including some he didn’t know very well. Potter Mansion, at least, was filled with dozens of rooms, rare visitors, and brilliant windows. He’d been moved into a guest room for the rest of the summer simply for the floor-to-ceiling patio doors it possessed that had a splendid view of the sunset. After being trapped in an oublie, light was a welcome counterpoint to his memories. Grimmauld, while lacking the ambience of stone, was dark and oppressive even with the work Kreacher had done. It was simply the natural atmosphere of the house.

Harry settled for sitting down and delving into the intricacies of venoms and poisons, the memories tapping a staccato beat against the back of his mind.

Harry was downstairs in the sitting room, waiting for the floo after he'd received his OWLs that morning. It had been a pleasant surprise to receive his letter – nine OWLs! Apparently his cramming sessions had worked as he'd managed to pass History with an Acceptable, quite a lot better than he had expected.

He broke out of his strange calm when Nanna bounced into the room and called out, "Harry, Neville and Alan are here. The Weasleys should be here as soon as Hermione gets to their house. C'mon, your friends are going to hex me if I don't bring you out there."

Harry stood up and gave Nanna a short smile and purposefully ruffled her hair. "Stop bugging me, brat. I'm coming."

"Sometimes you're lost in thought, Harry." Nanna pouted. "You look scary when you do that. It's worse than you glaring, if I take Parvati's word for it, but this is Parvati and she's habitually scared of you and Neville, despite her air-headed ability to forget it as soon as one of you turn around and smile insincerely at her."

"That's Parvati for you, though." Harry shrugged. "Are you going to tail me everywhere?"

"Yes." Nanna answered, surprisingly seriously. "Professor Snape threatened to fail me on every summer homework assignment if I didn't make sure you remembered your potions and didn't get yourself hurt. With dad at work and mum kept busy altering a few of the twins products the Order asked for, he said you needed supervision."

Harry growled, "He would."

"Harry, right now he's working on healing you and I don't want my brother getting more injured."

"I won't be, Nanna, and I'm sure Alan can remember all of that. Just come find me if I haven't come around when it's time for the potions. You know a point me spell."

Nanna frowned but nodded. "Fine. Please tell me that you've remembered it, alright?"

"I will Nanna." Harry slipped into the sitting room and smiled as Neville and Alan both shot him worried looks. "Hark, the ever brave Slythindor is still in one piece. You can stop looking like your dog is dying now."

"Hey, gimme a break." Neville crossed his arms. "I think turn about is fair play. You didn't let me out of your sight after I stopped being an ass in school."

"Au contraire." Harry scolded. "You didn't leave my sight on your own initiative, Neville."

Neville shrugged. "Mostly because I'd drawn the entire school body's ire."

"There is that." Harry nodded. "And you, Alan. What have I told you about feeling guilty, you Gryffelin?"

'Gryffelin?' Alan mouthed, before shrugging. "I'm not guilty. I'm concerned. You were concerned all fourth year; we've all got our turn about right now."

Harry laughed shortly and fell into the armchair across from the other two boy's places, Neville on the love seat, and Alan on the match to his armchair. "We do at that. What a group. All we need now is for someone to attack Blaise and Ron or Hermione, and the whole group is covered. Something unpleasant seems to happen to everyone around us."

"See!" Alan leaned forward with a mock serious expression. "I am bad luck."

"I hardly call Nanna getting together with Dillan bad luck." Neville drawled. "Although if you want to attach it to the family, it's bad luck for James ..."

Harry snorted. "Dad's bad luck started when he decided to be prejudiced. Then I ended up being Slytherin, Nanna fell for Dillan, I got in with Alan and everything went downhill from there."

The disposition of the group resulted in laughter. Five minutes later, the floo flared, and the Weasleys came over. There was a supper planned for later that evening, and while the rest of the Longbottoms would be coming over later, the Weasleys had decided to all arrive now. Harry was surprised to see Bill come through, but the even bigger surprise came when Fleur stepped out of the fireplace. Molly shot a glare back at her, and then smiled at Harry.

"Harry, it's wonderful to see you doing well."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. I believe Lily is upstairs at the moment if you want to go visit with her. Bill, it's a pleasure to see you as well. Ms. Delacour, I—" Harry didn't get to finish before Fleur swept down on him and abruptly kissed his cheek. Fortunately, he didn't feel any reaction, but he still quickly pushed her off, "Fleur, sorry but please don't." He was blushing furiously now. Her charm wasn't lost on him, he'd just managed to ignore it with formality. "Really, it's this curse —"

"Oh my, 'arry!" Fleur gasped. "I'm so sorry, I deedn't know. Bill just told me about your ordeal, and I couldn't 'elp but feel so sorry for you and so impressed with your bravery!"

His blush had to be twice as bad now. "It was nothing. Really. Thank you for coming, I hadn't known you were in Britain."

"I took a job part-time with Gringotts to improve my Eenglish, so Bill brought me 'ere to meet 'is family. He 'ad not thought there would be such a get-together, but I am more than 'appy to meet the rest of his friends. You are all such brave young men."

Harry remembered there were others in the room finally, and flushed again. Awkwardly, he bowed. "I'm sure it will be a wonderful meal, then. I hope you won't be bored with the wait; there isn't going to be very many people here aside from the kids my age until much later. My mother is upstairs, working on a few charms, and, well, my friends are kind of expecting me to be with them so I can't very well show

you around, nor is there a house elf with free time; those we have tend to schedule themselves pretty strictly on everything. Um, I could show you and Bill outside so you could look around the gardens?" He was beginning to feel rather tongue-tied. He hadn't been around Fleur much – the Beauxbatons students had kept to themselves or Ravenclaw, and when the tasks came around he'd pretty much stuck to watching Alan. Fleur hadn't affected him nearly so much then...

He missed her response when a sudden memory swept over him, Fenrir again, his wrists rubbing raw in the shackles he wore suspended from the ceiling, his claws digging into his lower back and thighs. Crashing out of it, Harry staggered, choked, and felt someone with small hands leading him aside until he was dropped into one of the chairs. He struggled to breath and the sudden intake of air cleared his vision again. Ginny was holding his shoulder, her hand holding up his fringe as Neville talked quickly and easily, something about these things happening and "I'll show you outside, I practically live here. It's no problem; he'll only get persnickety if you fuss anyways. You'll see him again at the meal, or if we decide to go flying. I'll be sure to lend you a broom..."

"Neville's a pretty fast talker, isn't he?" Harry offered weakly.

Ginny clucked her tongue and smiled. "Well, yes, he is that. Are you alright?"

"You know, Neville is right in saying I'll get pissy if you fuss." Harry smiled up at her, leaning back and stroking down his hair. Ginny just smiled.

"I'm not fussing. I'm asking if you're all right, and if we can go find somewhere for Hermione to pop without bothering anyone. She's been insistent on not sharing her OWL scores until she gets here."

Harry smiled and glanced up. Hermione was indeed bouncing in place, her eyes bright and mouth pursed. She also sent a glance down the hall Neville had left through. Harry kept himself to a small smile. Despite their break-up, Neville and Hermione were both still very interested in each other, something they tried to disguise as competitiveness and didn't fool anyone but themselves with, if even

that. "The sitting room should be free. We could also go up to the guest room I've been staying in and sit out on the balcony. It's a gorgeous view out there, especially as the day wears on."

Several people nodded, and a general agreement occurred. Suddenly, there was a loud clatter, and a horse poked its head out of the hall Neville had left down. Harry suppressed his desire to smile and merely raised his eyebrows. Neville changed back and rolled his shoulders. "Going up stairs as a horse sucks."

"Why'd you do it, then?" Harry asked.

"Curiosity." Neville shot. "So, I wanna know what everyone got on their OWLs."

"We're going up to the guest room with the large patio doors and talking on the balcony. Race you?"

"How are they going to find their way without you leading?" Neville asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Nanna's chatting with Ginny, she can lead them. Or they can keep up." Harry returned. "C'mon."

Neville laughed and started running. Alan, up ahead, jogged slightly and Harry led out of the room, turning abruptly and heading for the stairs, Alan just steps behind him. Neville caught up easily and had to stop as Harry got the stairs first, leading the way up on the too small staircase. Nobody could pass on it, mostly because it was a servants area and not for regular use. Due to its location, however, the boys used it as a straight shot into the upper levels and Harry's typical room. Due to his move, however, the hallway became a long, straight stretch, one that favoured Neville's stronger, longer legs. Harry greatly enjoyed stopping abruptly and opening the door halfway along – Neville had forgotten which room he was heading for and gotten ahead of himself. Harry threw open the doors and shouted, "Taa daa!"

Alan, beside him, panted lightly and glanced around. "Nice room. Is this typically a guest room?"

"Yeah." Harry answered. "My parents saved it for that, which is why I have a smaller room normally, but I'm thinking of making this a more permanent move for Christmas and next summer."

It was an opulent bedroom, with a small dais off to the left and three bookshelves opposite. The dais sported a four-poster-bed with hangings in a pale red, and a white and rose bedspread. Harry was a little embarrassed by the feminine array, but the light colours helped when he woke sweating in the night after a nightmare. The walls were similarly light – mostly white, with a white-on-cream patterned border. The bathroom was a simple wooden door red-orange in colour, and the patio doors were the same wood, edged in pale yellow, rose, and cream curtains. Alan gave Harry a moment's glance before simply walking across the light red carpet and pushing open the doors. Looking out, he whistled appreciatively.

"This is an excellent view, Harry. I'd take this room just for that. The sun would set just to your left, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah." Harry walked up behind him, hands tucked in his pockets. He knew everyone would find the room rather ... curious. The view would distract them, though. He was just glad the twins weren't here, and wouldn't be arriving until much later due to their shop.

Coming up behind them, Harry heard the girls enter the room alongside a mildly confused Ron – he must have missed the staircase, or when they entered the room as he'd been trying to keep up – and Hermione immediately crooned, "Oh, this room is gorgeous."

Harry immediately winced. Behind him, he heard Nanna say something, and there was a soft, "Oh." It was only a few more moments before they joined them outside, and Ron whistled much as Alan had.

"I could definitely put up with a room like that for this." Harry didn't bother to correct him. The view was half the reason he'd taken the room. However, the soothing effect of the bright colours had left him disinclined to change the room any. Maybe next year he'd feel like it,

if he kept the room. His old room was almost suffocating red and cream. It reminded him too much of blood, now, blood and bone. Or claws.

Harry turned around on the railing before his mind began to cycle again, and grinned at Hermione. “Alright, we’re all here Hermione. Spill. What’d you get?”

Hermione bit her lip quietly. “I got straight Os. Eleven OWLs.”

“Go Hermione!” Harry called. “That’s fantastic!”

“How’d you do?” Hermione asked immediately.

“Nine OWLs.” Harry happily answered. “I surprised myself, getting an Acceptable in History. It’s all because of that freaking cramming, honestly. And I got four Os.”

“Really?” Both Hermione and Neville asked. “What were they in?” Neville continued.

“Care of Magical Creatures,” Neville scoffed immediately; that had been a given, “Defence, Transfiguration and Potions.”

“Hah!” Alan laughed. “I knew you’d manage that one!”

“How’d you do, Alan?”

“Nine OWLs.” Alan answered. “Four Os as well, in Ancient Runes rather than your Care, but otherwise the same. I flunked History – got a D.”

“Unsurprising, considering you didn’t even finish the exam.” Harry laughed. “Neville, yours?”

“Nine.” Neville answered succinctly. “One E, in History.”

“And the rest Outstanding?” Harry grinned as Neville nodded curty. “Ron, you do good on yours?”

"Yeah," Ron hesitantly answered. "Seven OWLs."

"Lemme guess, flunked Divination and History?" Alan asked. "Don't sweat those, they don't count for anyone but scholars and flakes or Luna. What were the rest of your grades, Es?"

"I got an A in Astronomy, but Es in everything else." Ron smiled hesitantly. "I'm really pleased with that."

"Not everyone is like Neville and Hermione, Ron." Harry gently reminded him. "Those two are insane. Don't compete with them. And you know Alan and I are overachievers – Transfiguration and Defence respond well to extreme force. It doesn't count for everything. And Alan's got a bloodline for Potions."

"Um," Ron scuffed his foot on the ground and coughed lightly. "I –I'm still not sure what to take for sixth year. You know, besides the obvious. I wanted to be an Auror, but Snape doesn't take anything less than an O."

Alan frowned thoughtfully. "I'd prevail upon him, but he told me to leave him alone about Potions this year. Whether he's just being surly or not, I don't know, but you may be able to get in. Put it down, at least. I could tutor you in what we cover if you think you're dedicated enough. Now the other core classes should be fine with Es – Charms, Transfiguration and Defence, but for an Auror..." He looked over to Harry and Neville. "Help?"

Neville rolled his eyes. "You'll need at least another class for Auror. Herbology is typically the choice, because it's counterpoint to Potions and you might run into a nasty bit of horticulture, but you could also take Care or Astronomy. Between the two, Care is probably the only one that can actually hold any merit aside from Herbology."

"I wouldn't want to be alone in the class," Ron started hesitantly.

"I'll be taking Care." Harry put in. "Probably alone in it, certainly, but that would mean I could talk Hagrid into showing me the animals I want to see in particular, or skiving off if I'm really stuck on my homework."

"Why are you taking Care?" Neville asked, curious.

"I plan on taking everything I qualify for that might be useful. I'm dropping Astronomy and History, but taking everything else."

Neville grunted. "Sounds about right. I'm pretty much doing the same."

Hermione's eyes gleamed almost frighteningly as she beamed at them. Harry turned away to keep his smile from being noticed and addressed Ginny, "Are you looking forward to your fifth year cram?"

Ginny shrugged. "If I have trouble, I'll just ask Dillan or Luna for some help. It can't be that hard; Ron passed."

Ron flushed slightly, but turned to smile at Ginny. "I got straight Es, how do you think you're gonna do?"

"I should be fine." Ginny smiled warmly at him, with an edge of malice. "I'm going to ask Blaise for Potions tutoring, at least. And Harry can show me how to pass Care and Defence. Hermione can get my grades up in History –"

"Woah, catfight!" Nanna called. "And look at that sun, I think that might indicate that we'll be seeing the Longbottoms soon and perhaps Fred and George as well. Shouldn't you get to the receiving room to make sure they don't break something?"

Visions of the twins wreaking havoc on the furniture came to mind, and Harry quickly walked past the others off the balcony. "Okay, scary images. C'mon Ginny, stop rubbing in your high connections and come help me ensure your brothers don't bring down the wrath of the Marauders on their heads. Besides, am I going to have to tell Blaise you were a bad girl and need spanked?" When Ginny perked, Harry turned a grin on her, "And then tell your mother as well?"

She deflated quickly and ran past him to the stairwell, "Fine, catch me if you can!"

Harry gleefully ran after her, almost beating her into the room. Nobody had arrived yet, thankfully, and the others caught up with little trouble. Not five minutes later, the twins did roll through in a cloud of colourful smoke. Alan immediately banished it, and the twins pouted.

“Who banished that? It was supposed to be resistant.”

“I did.” Alan returned, smiling. “I may have just overpowered it.”

The twins exchanged looks and then shrugged. “There is that worry, Fred.”

“Indeed George. We’ll have to look into ways to counter that.”

“Must ask that lovely resource we have. He’d know.”

“He might, but we can’t be sure.”

“Ask first, worry later. And we have a meal to attend to, correct?”

“When James gets home.” Harry clarified. “And the Longbottoms arrive. And if either of you tries something else in this house, you’ll answer to the Marauders.”

“Bring it on!” George pumped his fist in the air. Harry glared and clarified.

“Correction, you’ll answer to my mum.”

“Eh,” Fred waved his hand. “She’s not that scary.”

“Would you rather answer to me, then?” Harry asked lightly. He expected them to just laugh it off. He did not expect them to fall silent and become thoughtful. They shared a look, and then shrugged and muttered,

“Fine, we won’t do anything inside.”

“Good.” Harry stubbornly continued, determined not to be put off by that reaction. “Dad can clean up the lawn just fine, though. Don’t you

dare shoot anything towards the house, though.” Harry smiled brightly at them and they quailed again. Really, did everyone have to act like he was scary?

“How did you all do on your OWLs? You got the letters today, right?” Fred asked.

“They did great.” Ginny said. “Ron got more OWLs than the two of you combined. Me, I’m wondering why you didn’t pass more because you both got Os on what you did take. I believe those were Defence, Charms, and Transfiguration, right?”

“Didn’t you guys also take the Potions NEWT this year?” Neville abruptly asked. “Wasn’t it a dare?”

Fred and George both abruptly focused on Neville. Harry had to agree; he hadn’t heard that.

“Where did you hear that?”

Neville smiled innocently at them. “You were discussing it together in the common room early June. Debating your chances. Did you win?”

“We didn’t take part in any such bet.” Fred straightened and tugged his shirt straight. “And don’t repeat that.”

“Gonna lose if someone finds out?” Neville asked. “Because you bet Jonas?”

George flinched, but answered, “No, more that mum would kill us if she suspected we skived off the tests. Jonas lost when we passed. Silence wasn’t part of the bargain.”

“What was the bet?” Harry demanded, curiosity killing him. “You can’t have talked with him all last term just over that one bet.”

“Mostly, yeah, it was.” Fred offered. “But … You gotta keep this quiet, okay?”

Everyone present nodded, most of them with a curious look.

“Can’t have this getting back to mum, but the money Alan gave us is drying up and while we’re doing good we can’t expand right now and we really want to. Jonas was dreadfully curious about our products,”

“Dreadfully so, poor man.” George agreed,

“So we talked and liked his interest, especially when he started mentioning partnerships and funding and further research.” Fred nodded eagerly. “It was quite the healthy interest.”

Harry had to bit his lip to keep from laughing or scoffing. Jonas’ interest wasn’t a healthy thing to have in his books, but he supposed a lucrative deal was a good mitigator.

“Well, Jonas was most disappointed as he’d somehow found out we had less than stellar OWLs. He was convinced,”

“And rightly so, I must admit,”

“That we’d tossed our tests on purpose with lack of interest. So, he dared us to pass one of our NEWTs we currently weren’t taking classes in.”

“His part of the bargain was something he was quite interested in doing anyways, funding our efforts with his family’s money, as his uncles and brothers were very interested from what he’d said and a few items we let him send along.”

“Our part was if we got less than Outstanding, we were to grant them free items and a controlling share in Weasley Wizard Wheezes.”

Harry felt a chill run up his spine. He really needed to ask his father about the Hodges soon.

“But of course,” Fred grinned, “we succeeded and now have funding and some very spectacular financial backers. We even granted them a small share in the company, not enough to control it, but significant none-the-less. We shouldn’t be bothered by others if we have such intimidating investors, after all.”

"But of course." Neville agreed, grinning wryly. "Who wants to mess with the Hodges?"

"Right you are." Fred nodded. He stepped quickly back as the floo flared again, and Melanie preceded her mother, father, brother, and grandmother. Everyone's backs straightened as Augusta came through the fire, and Harry stepped briskly forward to greet them properly. Madam Longbottom was scary.

"Madam Longbottom, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, it's a pleasure to have your company. My mother is busy upstairs on work for the Order, but she should be finished any minute. Should I show you to where she should be, or would you like to wait in the sitting room? My father, additionally, should be home any minute."

Augusta Longbottom straightened imperiously and nodded curtly. "The sitting room will do, darling Harry. Is Neville here as well? Doing well? He went along earlier, eager to share his excellent OWLs. I must say, he is a fine young man, probably outdid all of you, I dare say?"

Harry gritted his teeth. Augusta liked her grandson a little too much, and that green dress and vulture hat looked just a little odd – which, given her mood, became grating. It may have just been overcompensation – the Longbottoms weren't an old family, unlike the Potters, having only risen to a serious political presence in her father's time – but it still grated during social functions when she insisted on propriety and then bragged a little too much. Neville was cringing aside where he stood, and several of the others were looking elsewhere for any distraction. Harry, himself a little piqued and perfectly willing to use his current 'damaged' state as an excuse, smiled and added,

"He did wonderfully, Madame. Just as good as Ms. Granger, in fact – they both got straight Os. Hermione managed to outdo him in History, where he got an E, but I expect as a muggleborn History was a mite more interesting for her, when Neville knows so much of it already from your excellent lessons."

As she tried to determine where the insult was aside from his tone – Harry wasn't sure if he'd managed to remain polite through that himself – Harry tilted his head to the door and led Augusta out, Frank and Alice murmuring short apologies as they followed. Harry smiled, nodded some more, and then ran upstairs to tell his mother that the Longbottoms had arrived, and were downstairs. Molly smiled far more genuinely than she had earlier, and accepted for both of them before Harry was racing downstairs to find his friends. He passed the sitting room and found his father and Arthur had finally arrived and were talking readily with the Longbottoms. Arriving at his friends again, Harry grinned at them all and eagerly heard from Nanna that the meal should be ready in a half hour.

Thank god. Hopefully it would go smoothly.

He just feared that niggling doubt in the back of his mind wouldn't let it.

Oh well. After all, it was only family.

A/N: IT IS STILL THURSDAY! I SWEAR! Very sorry this is nearly late, but alas. It happens. And it is still Thursday here! (by half-an-hour...) Excitement, destruction, darling Harry, and OWLs. Very exciting. Absolutely wonderful. Alan getting slapped again - twice, even! And some irony. I do hope you enjoy; we have summer, and then we have school, and this is sixth year - and you must all be dying to see how far I diverge from canon. Or at the very least mildly interested... Well, I'm looking forward to what you think, and cheerio!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-one

Harry stumbled out of the floo with a grimace and wished the timing were better. He'd been determined to go to the get-together at Zabini's, but last night ... had been a rough one, to say the least. Nightmares came and went in severity, though they were always present. His throat was still sore despite the potions, and when Nanna came through she sent a glare his direction as well. None of his family really thought he should be attending, but Harry had Gryffindor stubbornness in spades.

However, that had not gotten him through the floo in as timely a manner as he would have liked. The gathering was already fairly full, and, in an interesting slide in etiquette, Blaise was standing at the floo with a ready smile, the rest of the group already gathered on the couches to the left. Usually, there would be another member of the household waiting to show them to an inner room – not the host of the gathering himself waiting. Harry smiled as he shook hands with Blaise, and asked the question with his eyes. After taking a moment to greet Nanna, Blaise then relaxed minutely and rolled his eyes.

"Ulyssa had been greeting everyone, but when Susan and Hannah came through, she had a conniption and refused to greet anyone else, particularly when I mentioned that there would also be Weasleys coming. She cannot stand muggleborns, much less blood traitors. Hell, she has a problem with the Potters and Longbottoms too."

"How can she have a problem with the Potters?" Harry asked curious. "The Longbottoms, I can see that. They're new blood, but we're neither blood traitors nor impure – the Potters can trace the line centuries back."

"You're close enough to the former for her taste, and James shouldn't have married a mudblood." Blaise quipped. "Either way. You're the last one to come through; we're waiting on Theodore and Raina, who are expected to be late."

The small scold made Harry wince, but Blaise's face surprisingly softened. "It's fine, Harry. Alan told me there might be some difficulty.

C'mon, the floo sounds before anyone comes through, and Susan and Daphne look hungry."

Harry blinked and then paled. 'Ah, Hell.' He mouthed. Blaise grinned wickedly.

After a moment to close his eyes, Harry turned and shot a smile at the gathered friends, striding over happily. He was glad to see them; the numbers just made him feel faintly nauseous. Unexpectedly, Susan jumped out of her chair and ran over, beaming. Harry smiled until he realized she intended to hug him – moments before she did so.

He almost thought it would be all right – Alan and Neville were tense in their seats, and Nanna and Melanie were watching with similar feelings, but nothing was happening – until several moments passed and his skin burst into flame. Harry hissed in pain, and Susan let go immediately, clapping her hands over her mouth in horror. Harry didn't see, collapsing to the ground and panting, trying to wait the pain out, trying to stop his eyesight from going black – he didn't need this, this was such a mess, everything was going wrong, everything.

Harry panted for breath, his chest tightening, heart pounding. Nobody was touching him, but he knew they were just out of reach, waiting, waiting for him to let his guard down, for the signal to start. He whined, curling up in a ball and tucking his head between his knees. He couldn't breathe ...

Several moments later, Harry could breathe again and his eyesight cleared. As he waited for his frantic thoughts to calm, he tried to remember where he was, what he was doing, and how many people would be staring this time around. He was leaning against an upholstered chair, probably brocade, and there a was stilted murmur of conversation going on around him. They were at Blaise's house, he knew, and most everyone had already arrived. Susan's hug had started that particular panic attack, one of the few he'd had in lieu of a flashback that, for him, weren't altogether different. He didn't like either of them. .

"How many minutes was I out of it, Neville?" Harry murmured.

"Less than five. It wasn't that terrible, no matter how hard Susan's crying." Neville sounded clipped; Harry supposed he knew why. He didn't usually have such a bad reaction, and Neville had been adamant about protecting him. They'd always taken care of each other. Glancing up, however, Harry got a very good idea of why he was so peeved this particular time. Daphne was smirking; Susan was puffy and looking highly apologetic beside a very pale Hannah. The group had split upon Susan's overzealous mistake, that much was clear, and it was also abundantly clear that the majority favoured Daphne's smugness. Harry straightened and walked over to crouch down in front of Susan. Harry put his hand on her knee and smiled weakly at her.

"I'm glad you were so happy to see me. I gather everyone hadn't gotten around to the particulars of what happened?"

Susan sniffed again, but Daphne snapped, "She shouldn't have done anything until we heard more of what lingered. That curse is a classic in torture, alongside the blood-letting curse."

"Not everyone knows so much about torture, Daphne!" Susan snapped. Apparently she wasn't so upset as to still her tongue. "I didn't know there were curses that could do that, much less that they didn't have counters!"

"Neither of you should be arguing!" Harry cut in. "Daphne, even you couldn't know what particular spells were used, and Susan shouldn't be expected to as a Light family. Your family is better informed, and I should also point out that you made no effort before I arrived to enlighten her, when you should have known she was out of the loop and when none of my friends who did know shared. Should I be angry with them for holding back as well? Should I be angry with you? Should I be angry with Susan for her ignorance? I didn't know those curses existed until I suffered them. Now stop arguing about it!" Harry glanced back up at Susan. "Please keep your enthusiasm separate from contact. I'm usually fine if I initiate small contact, but larger contact, particularly if I'm startled, or contact on more sensitive zones, typically has a bad reaction." Harry smiled warmly. "The enthusiasm is appreciated, though." Harry straightened and then

gave Daphne a small smile as well. "As is your defence." Harry wandered around to stand behind Neville, next to Tracey who gave him a flirtatious wink. Harry blinked at her and shook his head, looking down at Neville and raising his eyebrow. Neville chuckled.

"Tracey and Theodore parted ways. Tracey's been flirting with everyone since she arrived."

"Is everyone here? I don't see Salvador." Harry asked quietly. Blaise, cuddling Ginny behind Alan and Luna's chair, shook his head.

"Salvador and Lucille retired to one of the small rooms nearby. They said they had something important they needed to discuss. Lucille looked very torn."

"Salvador looked like he was walking to his death." Jonas drawled. "But then again, I know why he's been so worried. And it's his business."

"Remarkable." Dillan commented. "Jonas minding his own business."

"Shut it, tramp, and mind your own lady." Jonas returned, his voice holding only mock heat. It was the most pleasant Harry had ever seen him, and it looked odd. Stephanie and her friends started chuckling, as the floo rang. Blaise quickly stalked over, followed by a smiling Ginny, and he greeted Theodore and Raina as they came through. Both were clearly stressed. Raina was shivering and rubbing her arms fitfully, while Theodore was stiff in a way Harry knew very well – it was the stubbornness he was currently sporting, to continue going in spite of everything. Their curt acceptances were overrun by Salvador poking his head back inside the room.

"Jonas, could I speak to you out here, please?"

Jonas shot him a curious look but stood up and strode over. Harry turned back to the room and sighed as he looked around. Alan frowned, and, when Theodore and Raina came over, shot them a bright smile Harry doubted anyone present believed for a second. The room was fraught with varying levels of tension. The only relaxation was in the hands touching lovers. The thought brought

Harry to frown, so he quickly distracted himself with Theodore's answer to Alan's basic question.

"-Only chance she had to come, honestly."

Raina frowned at him, and Harry quickly searched his mind. Raina ... Raina Kozumplik. Her family was dark and rumoured to be Death Eaters. It wasn't a large surprise. Stephanie and all her friends were very dark, although only Raina had such prevalent rumours of joining the Dark Lord. Theodore's father was an outright Death Eater, no questions asked, but the man was old and feeble. Theodore probably had no difficulty deceiving him.

"I'm glad you could make it, Raina." Alan returned, his smile looking vaguely more sincere. "It'll be good just to catch up with everyone."

Raina nodded stiffly, and then Lucille and Salvador came back in, followed by a smirking Jonas who eyed the two speculatively. When they sat down, Lucille took Salvador's lap once more. Alan grinned at them, curious.

"And what has finally cleared up for you two? You were at each other's throats June. Mind; I'm sure quite a few things have changed, but really."

"I was just afraid I was pregnant." Lucille answered lightly. "My parents would have had a conniption, but apparently I'm not so no worries."

Harry caught the faintest flinch in her. As everyone else laughed, Harry thought he might have imagined it until he found Neville and Theodore eyeing her with the same speculation. So he likely wasn't wrong. However, it wasn't something he was going to pry at, not for that subject.

"What's changed for the rest of you? I'm sorry, we left before we could hear much of the conversation." Salvador raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Honestly, I'm surprised he's not tackled to a couch."

"I'm sure the girls would be ecstatic for the chance, but it's not a good idea with the lingering curses I'm dealing with." Harry answered lightly.

Salvador and Lucille both winced. "Oh, that's Hellish." Salvador said with feeling. Harry wondered exactly how his estrangement had gone, that he reacted so. Lucille looked mildly ill. "I hope you'll be recovering soon."

"The hypersensitivity should last two months more or something. The blood letting –haemophilia – should be finished before school starts." Harry shrugged. "It's no biggie."

"Curses don't leave as much a mark as trauma." Theodore offered quietly, his face solemn.

Harry shrugged. "And I'm flattered to be such a lovely topic, but really isn't there anything else to discuss, like why my little sister is sitting so close to a boy two years older?"

Nanna straightened and stuck her tongue out at Harry. "You can't tell me who to date!"

"Nanna, you're dating at thirteen?" Harry asked incredulously. He couldn't tell her not to, but he was at least going to learn about it. "And when did you decide you were dating? I haven't seen you two together much at all." He'd known Dillan was pursuing her, but not that she reciprocated.

Nanna sniffed; Harry was aware of Jonas and Dillan both watching him with intense interest, but he doubted they'd do anything. He wasn't forbidding her, just asking questions... "We met up after you all went to the Ministry and got back. He wanted to make sure I was okay."

"So that's where you got off to!" Tracey exclaimed. "I was wondering."

Dillan coloured faintly, and then turned to look Harry in the eye. "Do you have a problem with me dating your sister?"

Harry smirked with little humour. "I don't, provided she still likes you. You'd better run if you break up on bad terms or if you ever hurt her, though. Nah, the problem will probably be our parents. Mum will just be over-protective, but since my dad still doesn't seem to quite like my friends, you've got your work cut out for you, much less that he's an Auror..." Harry fought down his frustration. He hadn't found the time in the week since the dinner to get his dad to talk to him about anything. Lily hadn't known too much about the Hodges, although she'd certainly known enough to be frustrated about it and advise him to ask Sirius or James for more detail ... it was driving him mad, not knowing about what was so spectacular about the Hodges and asking Jonas himself was out of the question. Harry already owed him one favour; he did not need any more.

Frustrated without any real reason, Harry tightened his fists. He hated secrets. Hated not knowing. Hated this war, hated Death Eaters, hated Fenrir Greyback –

Harry choked on his scream again, his chest pressed against smooth wood, slick with blood and the strap landed against his back again, but he was nearly numb to the pain, too tired to think, too scared to feel, too worn to react beyond stifling the screams he would not release. And then his tormentor growled and someone else was hit with the strap. Curiosity woke him up, and someone growled behind him.

"Can't share? Can't I have a little fun? You're hogging this morsel all to yourself ..." The unctuous tones didn't disguise the raw desire.

"I earned my reward, Greyback, back out! The Dark Lord gave him to me, I won't have your filthy paws ruining it."

"What is going on?"

Harry shivered at the cold voice, unwilling to remember who it was, and the debate continued. He'd nearly slipped back into his detachment when a calloused hand pressed down on his back and fetid breath drifted over his face where it was turned aside.

“You’re a pretty boy, aren’t you?” A snort flared. “And your smell ... it’s familiar. Do you know Remus Lupin?” Harry couldn’t suppress a flinch. “Ah – that will make this all the sweeter, to play with his little pup.”

Fingers slipped down his back, and a new pain came, pain he wasn’t ready for, hadn’t anticipated, and yet dreaded. He gasped, and Fenrir laughed ...

“Harry!”

Harry gasped and stumbled; someone caught him as he fell and his skin flared. He began to hyperventilate as he was laid on the floor, but Neville’s voice called his attention and he slowly woke enough to hear him, distantly addressing someone else.

“No, no, back off. You can’t crowd him; listen to me already! Harry, wake up.” The tone changed, Harry knew, and finally he raised his head groggily, trying to remember where he was. Hadn’t this already happened? No, that was a panic attack ... he wasn’t sure which had been worse...

“That’s it, Nanna, go find Remus.”

Harry stiffened at that, and apparently Neville was paying more attention than he thought.

“Scratch that.” Neville called after her. “Sirius! Get Sirius, Nanna!”

Nanna shouted back an affirmative, and Neville brazenly hauled Harry up by his shoulders. Knowing who was touching him drove the burning pain down to a tolerable ache, like sunburn. Harry finally reacted and buried his head against Neville’s chest.

“I don’t like being an invalid, Neville.” Harry groused.

“You’re not.”

“Then why are you sending me home like one?”

"Would you like to stay here and see what your other reactions might be? We can see how many of these you can go through in a day, you know." Neville lightly offered.

"... No."

"Thought so. We'll try again, all right? You just need to go home."

Harry tried to think of an argument and failed. When Sirius arrived several minutes later from upstairs – he'd been sent alongside Remus as a mandatory escort in case of such a reaction, as well as to be there in case the other Order children needed them - Harry bid the rest of the group goodbye and left sullenly for Potter mansion. Distantly, he heard Nanna sigh.

"It's gonna be Hell to go home with him pouting, but he wouldn't like to remain either. He hasn't had episodes that close in weeks, this was just so stressful..."

She was right. Harry felt that only feed his desire to pout. This was going to be miserable.

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After the bad job at Blaise's, Harry was surprised to be feeling much better when the end of the month came around and the Order threw a half-hearted party at the Potter mansion. The people didn't bother him, and while he couldn't invite his extended group of friends, it was nice to hang out with Ron, Ginny, and Hermione rather than just Neville and Alan. Fred and George also made it, when they'd missed Blaise's event due to managing their store.

The only really surprising guest was Green, who seemed to have come to bring Alan, Harry and Neville several gifts – Harry's from Eli and Luce, Neville's from Andrew, and Alan's from several friends. Harry was curious to note that Neville got a communications mirror – Harry's gift was simply a light-hearted card and some candy he'd never found in Britain. Most of his gifts were along the same vein, but his father had included a dragon-hide vest.

Most interesting, however, was when Dumbledore arrived with a warm smile and gave Alan a small square package. Dumbledore rarely gave gifts, and Alan blinked at him a long moment before opening it. Harry had walked over and when Alan's gift abruptly snapped open and darted up, Harry snatched it out of the air without thinking. Alan pulled it from his hand and stared at it a long moment, waiting for Dumbledore to explain the snitch he held. Dumbledore was, surprisingly, smiling at Harry before he turned back to address Alan.

"It's my gift to you, to remind you of what I see to be a pleasurable pastime of yours. There is far too little joy in these days to forget what matters most."

"And what is that sir?" Alan asked quietly. "I greatly doubt its Quidditch."

Dumbledore smiled and turned to look up at Harry again. "Your friends, Alan." He answered gravely. "I'm sure Harry will be more than willing to steal that from you repeatedly. I simply wanted to give you something to enjoy, as I was sure such a game would delight you."

Alan smiled wryly, and Harry had to agree. Dumbledore was right about that, but he still didn't like the way he kept smiling while looking between them. Finally, Alan shrugged and let the snitch go again. Harry coyly caught it before it got far, and Alan frowned at him and then threw his hands in the air with a smile.

"I'll retrieve that before the evening is out, Harry!" Alan threatened.

Unaffected, Harry laughed and released the snitch again, waiting for it to dance to the edge of his reach and catching it again. He had to admit, it was fun. He'd never bothered to nick the snitch before, more than satisfied to play with it during the game and practice, but standing on two feet and going for it was just as much fun as racing after it on his broom, and currently the latter option was denied him. He only put it away when he nearly ran into somebody. He still wouldn't have if Alan hadn't snagged it when he released it; distracted by ensuring no one else was too close. Alan deactivated it and pocketed it, and bowed Harry into the main room again.

"Cake, birthday boy. C'mon, your mother isn't letting us have any until you're in there."

"Aww can't deny you your cake, now can I?" Harry laughed back and strolled in, slipping into the seat he'd been saved near the head of the table. By habit, he took the one a step down, letting Alan sit nearest the head. James shot the display a strange look, as did Dumbledore, but both were quickly distracted. Harry suspected Sirius had kicked James, but Dumbledore gave Luna a deeply thoughtful look as the Ravenclaw was tucked her wand behind her ear, a wide smile on her face.

Harry just shook his head and blew out the candles on his cake, alongside Alan and Neville. He immediately glared at Sirius – on each cake, one candle had remained lit. On Harry's, there were two. He wasn't buying the innocent looks he was getting. Neville and Alan both just laughed.

Hah, funny. They didn't have two girls vying for their attention. The catfights were bloody scary.

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Alan played with the snitch later that evening as he glanced idly at the clock. They'd all retired, but Alan hadn't gone home – Severus had somewhere to be, and he asked Alan to stay in a guest room at Potter manor, along with Green who had claimed to have business in the area. Alan suspected Geoffrey had asked him to be there as security. Amaranth and Louis had probably decided he needed to be away his lab to get the fumes out of his brains, and Alan couldn't disagree. Green needed a detox on occasion. He was also very good with fast, broad protective charms that could stop everything short of a charging rhino or an unforgivable.

Yes, they had tested it with a rhino.

However, he was staying up because he was curious for when his actual birthday came around. Luna had vaguely told him to expect a surprise as the party wound down, and she'd giggled, pulled her

wand from behind her ear and held it to her lips before dancing off. Alan had been most bemused, particularly since she had to know he was staying at the mansion, but he'd been planning on staying awake anyways, as he always did. It had long amused him that Regulus remember exactly when he'd been born, so it had become ritual to wait until one in the morning. Currently, he had fifteen minutes to go.

The snitch was entertaining, glinting in his lamplight and darting around the room. Alan couldn't help but wonder what on earth it was for. It had reacted to neither of them, despite he, Harry, and Neville spending a half hour before they had to sleep trying to hex it into reacting. As far as any of them could tell, it was just an ordinary snitch. While mildly disappointing, it didn't change that it was a fun toy to play with and Harry and Alan had most avidly enjoyed the game of keep away.

Remembering, Alan frowned. While Harry and he had been chasing each other around the house, Alan had caught sight, several times, of James watching them play with a strangely conflicted expression. Alan doubted James could like him any less, but he certainly didn't want to make it worse. Still, though, it might have been something else ... he just couldn't think what.

Someone knocked at his door, and Alan glanced at the clock. Seven to. Quickly, he rolled out of bed and opened it, finding Luna beaming up at him, her hair tied back loosely with a ribbon and a small cookie lit with a single candle. Alan couldn't help but smile.

"Luna, thank you." Alan reached for the cookie, but Luna pulled it out of reach and smiled that lovely smile again.

"May I come in?"

There was nobody to complain. Alan stepped aside and let her in, contemplating leaving the door open but shrugging it off. What, like he wasn't old enough to know better? He'd suffered through the talk when he was thirteen. It had been horribly embarrassing: Geoffrey had been awkward at first, but then Fenris and Amos joined in... It had kinda spiralled out of control until Mellisande and Autumn had

kicked them out and had their own say. Luna noticed his awkward look when he turned around.

“Yes, Alan?” She queried.

“Nothing Luna. Just thinking.”

“You’re sixteen.” She pointed out. Automatically, Alan glanced at the clock. Five minutes.

“Not yet.”

“Oh.” Luna glanced over. “Right at one?”

“Well, that’s when I always wait up to.” Alan shrugged. “Regulus remembers it that way. I doubt it’s exact.”

Luna glanced back over at him, and then placed the cookie and candle on his bedside table. “Then we’ve got a bit of time, hm?”

“Yeah.” Alan sat down next to her and ran his hand over her knee. Luna pressed back, and Alan grinned before capturing her mouth.

It was their typical snogging until Alan abruptly realized he was touching skin. He wasn’t entirely shocked, until his hands slipped up and found the fabric of Luna’s bra at about the same moment he noticed Luna’s hands slipping beneath the elastic of his boxers. Alan pulled back and opened his eyes to really take a look. Of course, Luna was smiling brilliantly, looking quite pleased with herself at the moment. She happily squeezed his ass and while Alan didn’t mind, per se, it was uncomfortable in the most pleasant of ways. Luna must have noticed.

“Where did your shirt go?” Alan managed.

“I took it off.”

“Mhmm. And why’d you take it off? Not that I’m complaining, that bra is lovely,” it was lime green with darker green lace, “but, well …” Luna

leaned over backwards, giving Alan a long look at her thin torso and the underside of the bra. Oh, that's just dirty pool.

"It's past one." Luna purred. She leaned back and snagged the clearly magical candle, and held it out. "Blow."

Alan smiled crookedly. Did she always avoid difficult topics like this? But he obediently blew and the candle, surprisingly, went out. Luna immediately set the cookie aside before he could grab it, and Alan pouted. Luna just smiled back at him and slid his pyjama shirt off his shoulders. Alan considered whining. Blaise had been the one to steal every single shirt he owned, pyjamas included, and replace them with button-up shirts. Blaise had acted all innocent about it, but when he'd gotten the mass of shirts for Christmas third year and every shirt he'd brought had vanished... He didn't mind too much, but it'd have at least slowed Luna down and stopped her from nuzzling his chest and the small wisps of hair there. Luna, of course, proceeded to lick them. Alan swallowed and tapped her chin, lifting her head up to face him. Luna gave him big, innocent grey eyes and he struggled not to smile.

"Luna. What are you doing?"

"You smell nice." Luna purred.

Alan blushed deeply and sighed. Luna just giggled and slid his boxers further down his hips.

"Luna!"

"What?" She asked, eyes wide.

Alan opened his mouth but couldn't think of what to say. What was she thinking? And, well, if she was thinking what he was thinking then, well...

Alan couldn't remember being more uncomfortable and conflicted in his life. This conflict had not been covered in The Talk. He'd thought they'd gone over everything, but apparently not.

Luna finally lost her dreamy look and grabbed Alan's head to pull him into a searing kiss. She fell back and pulled Alan with her, before rolling over to get on top of him. Alan was too startled to register this until he found himself staring flat out at Luna's now bare chest, her bra joining her shirt – wherever that had gone – whilst he was lost in dreamland. He was surprised he still had his boxers on. His face felt flushed, and Luna was straddling his thighs, leaning forward to plant her elbows on his collarbones. Alan gave her a frustrated look. Luna absently stroked his forehead.

"Alan, I know you know contraceptive charms, right?"

"Of-of course." Alan stammered out, trying to think. Was this right? Was there any rule saying he couldn't? But... "But Luna, are you really sure—"

Luna covered his mouth and pouted slightly. "Alan, Alan, Alan." She pecked a cheek on his lips. "Yes. Because you're my boy-friend." She drew the word out with a smile, savouring the sound of it. "And because you're really attached to me, too, right?"

"Yeah ..." Alan managed, softly. "Yeah, Luna I ..." God, that's so corny but so true. "Luna, I wouldn't mind, really ... but I'm just not sure ... the timing is, is awkward."

Luna sat up a bit and tilted her head to the side. "Why? Because you might die or because it's midnight in a house where we might be interrupted?"

"I hope to Merlin we're not walked in on, but more so the first." Alan answered hotly.

Luna tilted her head again. "I'm not sleeping with a dead man, Alan. You're very much alive. Don't you think it's a good thing to celebrate that?"

"Well, I'll give you that." Alan offered awkwardly.

"Then celebrate."

"Luna, um," Alan bit his lip. "Happily, but I really don't know ... what ... I'm ... doing."

Luna grinned at him. "What do you think I'll be doing?"

Alan felt mildly bewildered a moment, but hesitantly, happily, he smiled.

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The next morning, the Hogwarts booklists arrived. When he went down to the breakfast table, Nanna bounced to her feet and began to, literally, run circles around him. Harry supposed this was an alternative to hugging him till he couldn't breathe, but it left him mildly nauseous. He quickly grabbed her shoulder, ignoring the flinching pain in his hand and demanded,

"Girl, calm down! What's got you wound up so tight?"

Nanna beamed at him and dangled a letter in front of his face. Honed seeker reflexes caught the letter out of her hand and he smiled when he saw his name. However, the envelope was far too heavy. Harry sat down and quickly pulled it open, ignoring his parents' smiles and Nanna bouncing on her toes beside him. The badge it had been hiding was Quidditch captain. Harry blinked at it, and cautiously eyed his parents.

"I'm still not supposed to fly." Harry offered quietly. "How can I be Quidditch captain?"

"You should be better by the first match." James pointed out. "And 'not supposed to' hasn't stopped you yet."

Harry grinned sheepishly remembering when he'd stubbornly gone out and been grounded after five minutes, the wind impact nearly blinding him with pain. He'd have run into a tree if James hadn't found him missing and flown out after him. However, he'd been really cautious and hadn't gone out since – mostly because of the fear of where he'd land, unable to see, than the fear of pain.

“Cool.” Harry answered, and flipped open the booklist. Seeing nothing particularly different and noting the books that looked like Defence tomes, Harry waved the parchment at his parents. “When are we going?”

“We’ll all be heading out with the Longbottoms, Weasleys, and Alan once everyone is together – Alan went ahead to Grimmauld to meet his father. I believe Luna is joining us as well.” Lily smiled, a bit wryly at something. “Your father is back in to work this weekend.”

Harry nodded. James had gotten three weeks free due to Harry’s condition, and had only been back to work that week. James had asked to have the day Harry got his letter off, and had been immediately granted. Apparently they’d already called in and checked, gotten the go ahead.

“What time are we heading out?”

“Finish breakfast and we’ll meet up at Grimmauld before driving down.”

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The trip was pretty straightforward. Harry finally needed new robes, as did Ron, Alan, Nanna, Connor and Catrin. Madam Malkin was somewhere between bothered and pleased that she had so much custom at once. Everyone was hustled through with something resembling finesse, and soon they were out and wandering to the next shop amid the unfriendly figures and street vendors hawking untrustworthy wares.

Everyone had something to get, and Harry questioned his sanity about taking so many classes as he had to grab a pile of books. His only comfort was seeing Neville, Hermione, and Alan similarly laden down. Connor and Catrin were grinning and racing around the shop eagerly, exclaiming over their books. Harry couldn’t help but smile bitterly at their innocence. Purposefully, he looked aside and frowned again. He hadn’t missed Alan’s grin earlier – James hadn’t liked it as soon as he’d seen it, but Harry had gotten used to Alan’s insufferable

look. However, usually he had a reason for it. Harry hadn't sussed this one out yet.

After Flourish and Blotts, they ran the rest of the gambit, including Ollivander's. The only bad point was that the ice cream shop was running slowly, for grief. There had been an attack recently, foiled only by very alert aurors, one of which had been James. While Fortesque, unfortunately, had perished, his sister had been talked into taking up his shop and continuing to maintain the employees.

After they had all the necessary items, including a gift of a cat tree for Arachne from Lily for Ginny's prefect appointment, they became an excited group heading further into the Alley looking for one store in particular...

The group halted as soon as they found it. Harry blinked several times and wondered if he was passing out again: he was feeling light-headed, but he'd be damned if it happened in public. After a moment he realized it was only the brilliantly flashing storefront – beside him, Neville looked faint as well, and was honestly squinting at the display. Lily murmured the words of the purple poster, shockingly emblazoned with flashing yellow letters 'U-NO-POO', mocking the ministry announcements about 'You-Know-Who'. Harry jumped as his father had a near miss with putting his hand on his shoulder, apparently only remembering at the last minute that he really shouldn't. James recovered admirably, instead taking a bow, his face split in a wide grin,

"I believe we must enter, if only to congratulate the twins on such a shockingly delightful store."

Harry snorted and followed Neville in, blinking against the overwhelmingly brilliant colours. The store was packed, the shelves barricaded by fascinated customers. Their group hardly fit within, and Harry got bumped and budged often enough to be panting faintly, pain flaring in his arms despite his stubborn insistence on ignoring it. He was ready to give up and yell for help when suddenly his robes were grabbed and he was hauled behind the till. He glanced up at one of the twins, a concerned expression gazing down at him.

“Harry, mate, you all right? You’re looking peaky.”

“Fine.” Harry panted. “I just need a –moment.” He leaned against the far wall and waited, eyes closed as the pins and needles faded, replaced with a feeling of being stifled. This was far too many people – he’d been so eager to see the store, he hadn’t thought it through.

“Harry! Harry, are you okay?”

Harry blinked up at his worried mother and found himself smiling despite his earlier episode. The sight of her chased away the stifled feeling, and Harry stood up straight and leaned against the counter, unaware of how badly the nearest cashier was blushing.

“I’m fine, mum, really. How’s everyone else?”

“Fascinated, although Alan was worried about where you’d ended up for a while. Neville reassured him he’d seen one of the twins rescue you. Honestly, Harry, why did you come in if you thought you’d react that badly?”

“I didn’t think, mum.” Harry shook his head. “I didn’t think about it, and I’m sorry. I was too excited.”

Lily pursed her lips. “Alright. Stick with one of the twins, please. I think they said something about showing Alan their back room, and he thought you might want to see it too.”

Behind him, the twin perked. “That sounds marvellous. Harry, c’mon I’ll take you back there to meet them. Keep up the good work, ladies!”

Harry noticed all the cashiers were women, one of whom actually looked faintly familiar with black hair and a Cheshire grin. She turned back to her work quickly, though, and Harry followed in Fred’s wake – at least, the nametag said it was Fred and Harry felt that was a fair judge to go by. They disappeared into a back room, and Fred waved to George, standing and watching Alan inspect the shelves.

"Thought I'd give our initial investor a look at the specialty products we've made." George nodded. "Giving our dear Slythindor a break from the overwhelming mob?"

"Caught him looking ready to pass out." Fred scolded. Harry coloured, but didn't argue. Fred was right. Alan glanced up from inspecting the squirming black thing in his hands and frowned at Harry.

"Harry, you had me worried. I was about to hex someone when Neville told me Fred had run off with you. Didn't you think?"

"I already told my mother this, Alan." Harry griped. "I'm sorry, I didn't think. I'm fine now, alright? It wasn't that bad."

"Wasn't that bad – Harry." Alan huffed and sighed. "Fine. Sorry. Keep it in mind, you fool, or I'll hex you."

"Yes sir." Harry snorted. "What are you looking at?"

"Decoy Detonator." George announced proudly. "Set it down and it'll run off and make a noise around the corner. Excellent diversion."

"We have a large number of Defence products." Fred grinned. "We're getting big money from it, especially since the Ministry found an interest in our shield hats. We'd thought them a laugh – dare your friend to hex you, and have him gape as it bounces right off –"

"But we ended up with an order of five hundred from the Ministry for its support staff!" George finished. "And aside from that," George lowered his voice to a casual volume, but he was grinning mildly awkwardly, "we're getting a large number of orders and ideas from the Hodges. They have major ideas, and some uses for a few products we thought a lot more innocuous than they proved."

"Made revising them a big priority to try and prevent it with the stuff we're putting up to the public, but those we send to the Hodges aren't corrected at all." Fred finished, shrugging.

Alan fixed them both with a firm look. "I warned you about it," he cautioned. "Keep in mind you may not be getting out."

Fred and George both grinned. “They aren’t getting it for free, and we’ve made it plenty clear where we draw the line. Got into a bit of a fight with the young man they had making that particular order –“

“Wanted us to brew some poison, he did.” George added offhand, still grinning.

“Sent him home with an extra pair of ears and a blue set of balls for that one,”

“Not to mention the tentacles.”

“Haven’t had them be so pushy since.”

A new voice piped in, “That’s because even Howard couldn’t undo the last few hexes.”

Harry glanced up to find the black-haired woman he’d half-recognized leaning against the doorframe just inside the curtain. A second look showed him what he’d missed. She had the same face shape as Jonas, but her eyes were far warmer, and she was smiling lightly, without malice. In the steadier light of the back room, her hair proved to not be black, but a dark dark brown – so dark it made little difference, but it was there.

“Ah, Carmine, darling.” Fred beamed. “So delightful of you to join us.”

“Harry, Alan,” George nodded to each of them in turn, “meet Carmine Hodges, Jonas’ cousin. She works here as both a bit of security,”

“And for the money.” She finished. “Even if part of it comes from my family. And that little hexing?” She addressed the boys. “It’s finally starting to wear off now.”

All four men flinched. Harry didn’t know what exactly they’d hexed him with, but … well, any sexual punishment couldn’t be good.

She grinned. “Personally, I found it funny. His wife got tired of him whining about the ache he couldn’t get rid of and dragged him off. I

don't think he got feeling too satisfied, but I'm willing to bet he got to learn a lot about what satisfied his wife. Howard just thought it was hilarious."

George frowned. "We weren't going for hilarious."

"Powerful then?" She raised her eyebrow once more. "It's been six weeks. No one's managed to uncurse him – the spells just wearing off, and slowly at that." Carmine snickered. "Again, my brother's wife has been quite pleased, although she's also just as excited about him being able to ejaculate again. Said something about being dead certain she'll be pregnant again."

"I'll assume this is a good thing." Alan drawled awkwardly.

Carmine smiled. She looked normal for a young woman, with a brilliant clear face and happy eyes. The smile destroyed most of her resemblance to the dangerous Jonas. "Oh, very good. Jemima has wanted another child since she started potty-training her little boy, so having another one will make her more than pleased. And Fred, George, you have a very happy auror who has mentioned he wants to congratulate you and check on his son. Something about you two running off with the boy?"

"Ah, that'd be Mr. Potter." Fred nodded. "Yeah, we just kidnapped Harry here."

Carmine eyed him curiously. "I heard young Mr. Potter got himself in a mite of trouble a month ago. You look quite well despite it."

"Thank you." Harry cautiously offered. Carmine smiled at him again, and Harry finally had to ask, "You don't seem much like your cousin."

"I was Gryffindor." She answered bluntly. "Our family can't always be Slytherin or Ravenclaw. Someone's gonna slip into Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. Don't have a Hufflepuff this generation, but I made it into Gryffindor. My father was a very scary Hufflepuff. Of course, I just about hexed my dorm mates into oblivion they were so vapid. Gotta regret arguing with that damn hat. I was a silly eleven-year-old and wanted to avoid my cousins. Ah well."

Harry smiled faintly at her. "Yeah, I know what that's like, wanting a different house."

"Huh." She grunted. "What house were you supposed to be in, chickadee?"

Harry glanced at Alan. "Slytherin."

Carmine grinned back. "Me too. Guess the line's a little thinner than you might think, hm? Must be why they argue so much."

"Quite." Harry agreed. "But we need to get back out there."

Carmine saluted them and returned to the counter while Fred and George flanked Harry.

"Well, time to be off!"

They both marched him into the main room, their presence and Alan's keeping the shoppers from crowding up against him again. He hated the necessity, but submitted to it and found a faint smile for James as he praised the twins' skill, ingenuity, and initiative. Harry slipped off from where he was, Alan tagging along quickly and slipped over to the brilliantly pink shelves where all the girls were talking quietly. As they came upon them, Melanie eagerly asked,

"Oh, Luna, was it really-?"

Luna glanced up to answer and turned faintly pink upon seeing Harry and Alan approach. Harry glanced at Alan and was surprised to find him similarly pink. He immediately turned to eye the products but didn't have any luck – he was tall enough to be eye-to-eye with a very personal WonderWitch product that only made his blush worse. Harry coyly stood on tiptoe and slipped it off the shelf, reading the label quietly.

"WonderWitch's personal lubricant – get that delightful shine and a tingling warmth, perfectly ready to share with that significant other."

“Very cute, Harry.” Alan groused. “Real cute.”

Harry put it back up – he didn’t want to be caught with that in hand – and turned to give Alan a wry grin. “So … can I assume the obvious about that smug grin you’ve had all day that drove my dad nuts?”

“Nonsense.” Alan waved it off. “That was entirely calculated.”

“Including pissing off Ron, Hermione, Nanna, and the Apothecary clerk?” Harry drawled. “When you were trying to have a perfectly casual shopping trip?”

“Okay, fine.” Alan broke down with a smile. “Yes. Yes, you can probably guess exactly why.”

Harry blinked several moments. “Wow. Um, I can’t imagine you having gone for that.”

“Well,” Alan grinned again, “Luna’s very convincing.”

“I’ll bet she is.” Harry grinned back.

Alan only laughed.

Abruptly, Harry and Alan heard Fred begin to explain some patented Daydream charms, and the Pygmy Puffs. Alan apparently did not want to be overheard – his candour with Harry was something only for his best friend – and they slipped back into the group, but Harry noticed now that Luna, while looking mostly unaffected by the late night interlude, was smiling wider than she usually did and sometimes looked a little pink as her eyes drifted out of focus. Harry had to hand it to her; she could really hide her reminiscing well. Nobody who wasn’t sure of what to look for would know what she was thinking about. Although…

Harry wasn’t about to try his little Legilimency on Luna, but Alan and he had agreed long since that they had perfect rights to try and slip in against the other. Harry glanced around and waited while they wandered the areas of the store and finally, when they were slipping out the front door and waiting for James to finish off his last minute

advice, Harry noticed Alan glance at Luna with a wry grin. He immediately scanned away from her, but it didn't fool Harry. When Alan glanced his way, Harry slipped inside his eyes and found himself in Alan's immediate thoughts.

"Luna, would you stop poking that?"

Luna's brilliant blue eyes glanced at him from where she lay, completely relaxed over his legs, her hand pointing at his length. Abruptly, she grinned and grasped it in both hands-

Alan pushed him out with a blush and gave him a half-hearted glare. His face was brilliant red, and Neville immediately noticed. However, when he glanced between Alan and Harry he realized something was going on – Harry was confident his face was bright red as well. Neville quickly stepped in.

"Say, what were you two going on about back there? Fred and George never let us back there, was it sex? There seemed enough of it on the top shelves, honestly."

Harry frowned, and Alan's face relaxed back to smugness. "Really, Neville, so jealous. Feeling left out?"

"Not in the least." Neville blithely answered. "They had some fascinating magic on their items. I was very interested in the daydreams myself." He grinned, and Harry and Alan laughed. Both of them knew Neville's habit of using an Auror level glamour to zone out in class. Nobody else seemed to have noticed their discomfort; Harry felt a little bad about intruding, but it was something important as well – a reminder to Alan to keep his wits about it. Had Harry been someone else, had the thought been something else ... he'd have been in big trouble.

After a moment, Harry noticed his train of thought and felt lead in his stomach. This wasn't what he should be thinking. He should be teasing Alan about getting laid, flirting with Daphne and Susan to figure out which he preferred. Neville never should have broken up with Hermione, never should have slept with Lavender. Never should have been raped.

He himself shouldn't have been tortured.

Harry felt someone approach and only glanced up only long enough to note that it was Alan. Alan cautiously placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. Nothing flared, so Harry leaned into it and shrugged lightly.

"Sad thoughts?"

"I want this war over." Harry softly added. "I don't want anyone else hurt."

Harry glanced up to find Alan's dark eyes heavy, his lips pressed tight. He nodded shortly.

Harry sighed again and brushed him off, plastering on a smile as James came back out and the group woke up again. However, a few nearby had heard, and few had missed Harry's abrupt change in attitude. While the reason wasn't exactly clear, it seemed to remind everyone of what had happened. For once, Harry didn't feel depressed about it. He felt it should mean something, something to remind them.

This war needed to end.

A/N: They're growing up, a bit more intrigue, a bit more information than you probably need... But hey, story! Lookeee! Preetty!
I think I had a little too much chocolate.

Up next! Rats, wands, and Hogwarts! Followed by school rivalries, intrigue, and maybe even more sex ... who knows? Let me know what you think.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-two

A few days later, Alan was beating Harry once more at a game of chess in Grimmauld place before the door was pulled open and Kingsley glanced around the room.

“Alan, can you come downstairs please?”

Alan blinked at him but complied, telling someone to take over for him. Naturally, everyone watched him go curiously. Harry and Neville followed, ignoring Kingsley’s frown. He didn’t stop them, though. While Molly had laid down the law and refused to allow Ron or Ginny to attend meetings, Neville, Harry and Alan had constant permission to do so, even though their parents preferred that they did not. None of them had heavily used the privilege, though, usually only when something was happening that involved them. They had been quite happy to have very few reasons. With Alan being summoned, however, Harry and Neville certainly would not stay behind. Neither did Alan mind.

In the kitchen, everyone was sitting awkwardly, either staring or studiously not looking when Alan came in and waited while Kingsley retook his seat, Harry and Neville waiting by the door, leaning against the frame on either side. James and Lily frowned lightly, as did Alice, but their expressions cleared. It was Dumbledore who solemnly held out a parchment letter. Alan didn’t reach for it.

“It’s a letter we received that concerned you, Alan.” Dumbledore explained carefully. “It contains valuable information, information that tells us that there is dissension in the ranks. The writer is a Death Eater wishing to defect, and purposefully currying your favour. His offer ...” Dumbledore glanced up at him significantly. “Look, and read.”

Alan took the paper and flipped it open, scanning the messy writing. It held little more than Dumbledore had said. The writer came across as terrified, his writing shaky, messier than even bad writing could account for, and the tone of the writing, the word choice was frantic and obsequious. The offer, at the end, was nebulous but enough to interest him.

'I have something for you, a sign of good will. It's a cup the Dark Lord is trying to hide. He had to move it out of the Lestrange vault, and the security was loose. I will gladly hand it over for my safety and protection.'

The letter was signed P. Pettigrew. Alan couldn't think of who it was, but he did recognize the name. He glanced up. "Who is —"

"Unimportant, Alan." Dumbledore cut him off. A murmur ran through the room. Alan suspected he was keeping the identity secret on purpose, but ... Oh. The name placed itself: Wormtail. With the Marauders in the room, there would be no such deal.

"Why is it so important, then?" Alan asked. "What are you thinking this might mean?"

"I believe the incentive he is offering is greater than he knows." Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose. "How greatly do you trust Luna's divination skills?"

"With my life." Alan answered instantly. "At least with cards, I would. It's nebulous, naturally, but what you can gauge by it, it's very accurate."

"Would you ask her if she thinks that is worth the deal or not?" Dumbledore asked. He held out his hand and Alan skimmed over it once more before handing it back over. One fact stuck with him: the letter was addressed 'Alan Snape'. Alan didn't release the letter immediately when Dumbledore claimed it, looking up to meet his eyes.

"Why did you open this before giving it to me, if it was addressed to me?"

"I had to ensure there was no traps, Alan." Dumbledore responded. "And as it came through me before then, as a member of the Order —"

"I am no member of your Order." Alan flatly answered. "I appreciate you taking the care, and would not object. I already have several

wards against unwanted owls, so he probably sent it to you when it got returned trying to come to me. However, I do not appreciate you presuming so without asking. Now," Alan quickly buried the resentment with practicality and gave Dumbledore a smile, "if something addressed to me comes through you first, by all means check it as thoroughly as you believe it requires. You may not touch anything that is coming directly to me."

"My apologies." Dumbledore nodded carefully. "It was presumptuous of me. I have never touched your direct mail. Thank you for understanding. Would you like me to hold onto this letter for you?"

Alan's mouth quirked into a smile. "If you want to. I'd just throw it away. Feel free to continue the correspondence as it benefits you. Luna's just upstairs, so I'll ask her right away. Would you like me to come back when I have her answer?"

"Certainly. We still have much to discuss. I trust none of you boys desire inclusion at this time?"

Harry and Neville both shook their heads, and followed as Alan slipped out. They waited until they were past the first landing to ask.

"What was that letter?"

"Exactly what Dumbledore said it was. And I'm sorry, but I don't think you'll be able to answer safely on who it was yet. I'll tell you with Luna, okay?"

Both Harry and Neville accepted it, and waited as Alan poked his head into the room.

"Smarty-pants!" Alan called. Luna, Hermione, and Melanie raised their heads at once. Everyone else looked up out of curiosity. Alan grinned and clarified it, "The crazy girl." Nanna snorted, but Luna happily stood and pranced over to Alan leaning her head up to meet him in a short kiss. Alan smiled, remembering, and quickly spoke to keep himself grounded. "I need you to do a short reading on something. Do you have your cards?"

“Always.” Luna calmly answered. “Here or later?”

“Just upstairs, eh?”

“Why not your room?” Luna asked innocently.

Neville answered. “Because his head would explode from the blood rush.”

Alan strongly suspected Neville had meant that double entendre in the meanest way. He knew Harry might have told him – if he hadn’t, there had been easily enough evidence in how Alan and Luna had both behaved that he could guess.

It still wasn’t very nice.

Alan was still blushing when he led Luna, Harry, and Neville to the library. Behind them, Alan was mildly surprised to notice a very stubborn looking entourage of Ginny, Ron, and Hermione. Their stubborn looks said more than anything how effective asking them to leave would be.

“Alright.” Alan sighed. “Luna, Dumbledore got a letter that was addressed to me – Geoffrey gave me a ward that deflects owls without personal direction: those who don’t know me personally or don’t have legitimate business with me. The thing was actually experimental as far as I know, so anyways, apparently the person tried sending it to me through Dumbledore, and, as Dumbledore is a manipulative old codger with good reason, he opened it. He thought the part where the defector bargained a cup Voldemort had been guarding could be important. Luna, he’s wondering what you might say.”

“I say the cup is a lot like you, Alan.” Luna murmured, but her face looked troubled.

Alan rolled his eyes and smiled down at her. “Okay, but does that make it important?”

"Um." Luna quickly fished her cards out of her pocket, sat down and began to shuffle them. "Who was the deserter?"

Alan glanced shortly at Harry and Neville. "P. Pettigrew."

Harry hissed, stiffening, and Neville growled, "Wormtail."

"Wormtail." Luna quickly laid down a card, then another and another. She looked them over and frowned again. "Very important." She answered curtly. "Very very important. Take it as it comes and treat it as you will." She tilted her head and regrouped the cards, shuffling them with a worried expression. "You can go tell Dumbledore now. I need a moment."

Alan blinked, but nodded and ushered the others out. He didn't argue with Luna when she asked things, particularly in regards to her divination. She was the one who knew how it worked after all, not him, and it wasn't unreasonable.

Taking the message to Dumbledore, the Headmaster immediately nodded and stood. "Very good, Alan. Do you have a moment? He is waiting for us."

Alan glanced around and then shrugged. "Sure." There was no reason not to, and getting out and doing something was welcome. With the letter addressed to him, it made sense Alan needed to go anyways.

"Severus," Dumbledore asked, "Please clear out the upper sitting room. We'll return to there. And send Green to the Potions lab three floors up. He knows what to expect."

Alan rolled his eyes at the completely bland orders, but he accepted the portkey when it was offered and swallowed past the tug and wave of motion. Landing in a dark alley, Alan snorted. Dumbledore glanced at him with a faint hint of a smile.

"Amused, Alan?"

"The décor could use some work." He drawled.

"Of course, it is to be expected." Dumbledore gravely answered.
"There are only so many places safe for a man on the run."

"Or welcoming to a rat." Alan returned again. The door they opened was rickety and worn, but Dumbledore was unaffected, brushing aside the cobwebs and striding inside as though it were a grand ball. Alan followed, his right hand in his pocket on his wand, a smile still on his face even as he glanced around eagerly and took in all the various and impressive sights of destroyed timbers, broken glass and massive cobwebs and the spiders inhabiting them. Alan really hoped nothing fell on him – some of those spiders were larger than his hand. Ron would have had a heart attack. Finally, however, after walking up stairs that again made Alan wish there was something a little more substantial to the building, Dumbledore knocked shortly on the only relatively solid door.

Someone shuffled around behind it, and then hesitantly inched it open. Alan rolled his eyes. The place was in such a mess the only thing stopping the door from getting kicked open was the risk of bringing the whole building down. There was no longer even a doorknob. However, Dumbledore, the polite man that he was, had insisted on knocking. Alan just followed him into the room and turned cold eyes on the slumped and hand wringing form of Peter Pettigrew.

He was short, with his hair falling out, and the look of a man who lost a great deal of weight under stress, and had had that stress maintained. Peter Pettigrew was quite the shade of his former self, and he nervously stroked his silver hand, looking between it, his guests, and the room. Dumbledore managed a stern, grandfatherly look that Pettigrew flinched under, but he remained hopeful. Apparently the look was a good thing ... Alan would have been immediately pissed off. Course that may have just been his current dislike of the man, the coward and a stupid one at that ...

"Dumbledore, wha-what an honour. Please, please. You – you got my letter, I – I am so glad–"

"Save it." Alan snapped. "Why were you writing me, even if you sent it through Dumbledore?"

“I- I- Uh ...”

Peter wrung his hands again, and immediately grabbed at his right pocket. Alan felt his lip curl. Stupid. He would have acted, but Dumbledore put his hand out and Alan refrained. He doubted Peter could stop him if things went badly and he had to force him to give up the cup. He didn't think that rat could outmanoeuvre a kneazle, so he let Dumbledore have his say. Peter looked thankfully at Dumbledore again and disregarded Alan. Stupid times two. Did he think Dumbledore controlled him?

“You said you wish to defect, Peter.” Dumbledore's face turned sorrowful. “Why did you betray your friends to begin with?”

“We were losing!” Peter gasped out. “I had to, my life was at risk. I don't want to die; I'm not so Gryffindor, not so powerful. Please, Headmaster, I will do –a-anything! I –I have the cup, the cup Voldemort was hiding. Here!”

He thrust the item at Dumbledore, fortunately ignoring Alan's incredulous look at his lack of ability to bargain. Dumbledore carefully folded back the ragged bag and revealed a small, two-handled cup with an H crest. Something about it immediately made the hairs on Alan's neck prickle. The magic felt strangely familiar ...

“This is an interesting artefact.” Dumbledore murmured, refolding the bag down and holding it seemingly carelessly in one hand. Peter wrung his hands again and then returned to stroking the metal arm. “Why have you turned back now?”

Peter looked quickly at Alan, and then down. Alan smirked. He could guess why Peter was turning. He was scared shitless that Alan was winning.

“The ... the tide turned again.” Peter helplessly admitted, unable to lie he was so scared. “I don't, I can't ... I'm expendable, useless. I don't want to die.”

"Pathetic." Alan spat. A look from Dumbledore, and he softened his tone with an edge of mockery. "I suppose it's completely understandable, though." Another check, with a touch of legilimency, and Dumbledore conveyed his agreement. "But you gave us a very important item at grave personal risk." Alan remembered Luna's words, and enjoyed Peter's panicked look. Apparently he hadn't wanted that cup to be that kind of important. "You have my word, and Dumbledore's, that we will protect you from retribution that might come of your return to us or the theft of the cup. It's the least we can do." Alan had employed a small legilimency on Peter, and found the most curious memory leap to mind when Alan mentioned the cup's importance. Narcissa ordered him to check over the contents of what she'd inherited from Bellatrix, a simple visual inventory. She'd also told him how to move items without consequence so as to make a more thorough check. She'd listed several things that were most vital, some that had belonged to the Dark Lord and then sent him in. Terrified, panicked, he'd stolen the cup, which seemed the least important. The paper he'd referenced had been minorly hexed, but Alan couldn't pick it apart from there. He suspected Narcissa had implanted a minor subterfuge on the paper to ensure the cup's removal.

Gee, Alan would have to thank her. Later. Much later. He wondered if this had anything to do with that letter he'd seen Severus read about a month ago, a letter he'd dismissed as unimportant because the content had been so bland... Had he missed a code? He hadn't looked very thoroughly at the time...

The cup in hand, the promise made, Peter allowed Dumbledore to transport him as a rat – after Alan had grinned and threatened to eat him. Peter hadn't asked what Alan was and Alan hadn't offered. He imagined he was thinking up everything from a Grim, like Sirius, to a large Skrewt – not a kneazle. It was amusing to watch him shake and shiver.

They took a portkey back to Headquarters, and they arrived in the room Dumbledore had told Severus to prepare. As Dumbledore removed the rat from his pocket, he looked at Alan and nodded to the door.

"Please select a conscientious person who can watch him for the time while we finish off the horcrux? We don't need him lost."

"Of course." Alan chirped, leaving quickly. He knew exactly whom he would choose. Downstairs, Severus was pouting against the corner, apparently pissed off that Dumbledore had ordered him around and then out of the matter. Alan smiled at him – Severus frowned deeper.

"Dad, could you come with me for a moment? I have a job for you if you're interested. If not, I can find someone else." When Severus nodded and opened his mouth, Alan talked over him. "Come upstairs, please? To the sitting room?"

Severus scowled but followed, glancing over with a faint frown. When they were out of earshot, Alan continued. "We picked up both, and the cup was what he expected – it should be dealt with this evening." Alan made a mental note to ask what that was exactly. "As for the other, he has a promise of protection from retribution for his recent actions, however that doesn't cover a few past problems he might encounter, so please keep the Marauders out of the room? Oh, oops." Alan finished facetiously. "Forget I said that, would you?"

Alan could see Severus eyeing him suspiciously in his peripheral vision, but he didn't need to feed his father any more rope – not only would it be insulting, he might just decide to be contrary. It was an iffy matter of whether or not Severus would actually go through with that, but Alan was willing to take the chance. If it didn't happen now, there was a large chance of it happening later.

Dumbledore had already left the room, closing the door carefully and taking a moment to take in whom Alan had chosen. Dumbledore merely nodded and then beckoned Alan to follow him upstairs. As they walked, Alan quickly asked,

"Sir, what exactly was the cup?"

"The cup was a horcrux, Alan. Have you heard of those?" Alan shook his head. "They were Voldemort's insurance against death, and the reason he had the ability to come back. They are each a piece of his soul, broken by the worst crime against another human being –

murder – and then sealed into an object. It ensured his life even in the most meagre of forms.”

Alan swallowed hard. “That … is dark magic. That’s not even necromancy – Louis would probably …” Well, he didn’t want to think that. Louis could be creative with punishments. “You can destroy them, right? Ensure his death?”

“That is exactly what we will do. I have already found a few others – you destroyed one many years ago already, Alan.”

“I did?”

“Tom Riddle’s diary was a horcrux.”

Alan swallowed again. “Sir, how can you … how can you split your soul like that? It’s, it’s vile. Why?”

Dumbledore sighed and paused at the door to the lab Green was preparing. “Immortality calls to many men, Alan. Some will do anything for it. Now, you don’t need to be present for this, but if you so desire you can witness its destruction. I’m sure you’re quite familiar with the precautions required.”

“Hence Green.” Alan finished, finding a smile again. Green would be loving this. “I thought so. I would greatly appreciate it, thank you.”

Dumbledore nodded carefully and knocked on the lab door, waiting patiently as Green muttered inaudibly behind the wards and barriers. Finally, it slid open and Green’s eyes lit up when he saw the bag Dumbledore had.

“You really did get one, did you?”

“Yes Master Quintelyuv.” Alan snickered as Green flinched at the title. “You have the delightful chance to destroy this. I request the quickest method, please.”

“Yeah, sure. I just want to watch. If I get another I might fiddle, but not with these. They’re too important to keeping Alan safe to make the

destruction iffy at all, so ..." Green quickly emptied the bag into a large, thick glass bowl without touching the cup, putting the bag on the counter and incinerating it. Alan stepped well back and felt the fizzing of one of Green's protection spells leap up before his nose. Alan frowned, but accepted it; he'd made the mistake of stepping outside the boundary himself. He wouldn't be getting past that again. Dumbledore was still inside, but he only nodded slowly when he saw Alan stuck outside of it. Determined to ignore the inconvenience, Alan watched the process.

Green already had everything together. The horcrux was in the bowl, a journal with a quill hovering overtop was on the upper counter several feet away, and Green pulled a pitcher from further down the counter out, his hands inside his ever-present, highly durable gloves – he had about eight pairs in various colours, and at least half were always getting cleaned or repaired at a time as it took some time to make them wearable again after he was through with them, even if they were dragon-hide. This time, however, nothing exploded, flamed, erupted, or vaporized. The pitcher poured down basilisk venom – about a cup's worth – into and onto the cup. The metal smoked, snapped, and bubbled and a thin scream from somewhere outside the proper range of hearing occurred. Green immediately noted it, waited for the venom to stop bubbling and pulled out another phial, filling it with the used venom, and a small container took in the pieces of the cup. He was already talking to himself, repeating observations and findings.

Alan felt mildly disappointed. That had to be one of the most dull experiments he'd ever had with Green, scream included. However, that was a piece of Voldemort's soul now vanquished. It could have simply shined the cup, and it would have been significant.

He'd still expected more.

||||

The next day, Peter was missing and Severus was entirely too pleased with himself. Mundungus eventually brought the report: Peter was found strangled to death in Knockturn Alley, sans his silver hand.

Alan simply felt it was a good conclusion to the recent events. He was happy, the Marauders were happy, Harry was happy ...

September first was welcomed with chaos and nerves. Harry was entirely too stressed out and where Nanna had taken to helping ease his nerves she was fussing and worrying and double-checking her own trunk. Harry hadn't been able to do anything but stare at his packed trunk, unable to think of what he needed to double-check. When someone spoke to him from his door, he jumped and blacked out momentarily.

When his vision cleared, he was sitting on his bed, his father holding his face between his hands.

"Harry, Harry, come around now. It's all right; it's just me, your dad. C'mon wake up son."

"I'm –I'm here." Harry panted, trying to think clearly. James smiled weakly and sat down on the bed beside him, his hands back in his lap and clenched tightly around each other. "I'm ... sorry."

"Are you scared?"

Harry could only nod. James sighed.

"Harry, just trust your friends. They'll take care of you, and your teachers will know. If you need to leave a class, do so. You're close friends with both the Gryffindor and Slytherin prefects, and you know one of the Hufflepuffs as well. Ginny is fifth year prefect; I believe you said you knew the Slytherin male prefect as well." James laughed quietly. "Prefects aren't always a bad thing, Harry. They can easily help keep you safe."

Harry shrugged. "Sorry dad. I was just ... Thanks. I guess I needed that. Um, I don't know if I have everything."

"If you need something, write us and we'll send it. I'm sure you have everything you need." James stood up and smiled at him. After a moment, he tilted his head, a serious expression on his face. "Harry, I

do love you. I'm sorry I was so distant for last term, and it was at a terrible time as well. I didn't ..."

Harry glanced up at him, unsure of how he would continue. James had stopped writing as soon as Harry made it clear he was friends with Alan – with a large group of Slytherins, actually – after Christmas last year. It had coincided with Neville falling apart, Regulus and the Department of Mysteries, and then culminated in his own torture. James had still been distant, but something seemed to have changed

...

"I shouldn't have been so blind, Harry." James finished, stiffly. "Alan is a good boy, and a strong, valuable friend. I couldn't understand you, and it scared me that you were so different from me. I didn't seem to know my own son, but ..." He smiled warmly. "I realized you're not so different after all. I do hope you'll still write on occasion?"

"Of course." Harry smiled back, feeling a little confused as to what he was referring to but more than happy to accept the turn around. He might be more than a little faint at the moment, but he was hearing clearly enough and while it still didn't make sense, it sounded genuine. James turned and quickly levitated the suitcase, leading the way downstairs. Harry followed, swallowing his nerves. School was not this frightening. Seriously. Right? After five years, and only now he was feeling like this? He might know why he was so scared, but still

...

Well, either way it was inevitable. They got out the door on time despite his nerves, and as they were heading to the train, James stopped Harry and gave one last advice.

"I know Dumbledore wants this kept quiet, but I think you should be warned. There's a new Potions teacher, and it's not just Green. Your mother's and my old teacher, Horace Slughorn, will be teaching and likely he will also be talking to a lot of the students, particularly those with prominent parents such as you or Neville or Alan. There will be no issues if you refuse his invitations, or if you want to avoid him." Harry's face soured and James hurriedly continued, "He's not a bad man, he's just very ... enthusiastic and elitist. He may forget about

the current precautions he needs to have with you, so be careful. I don't want you hurt."

Harry nodded slowly, and smiled. "Thanks. Love you, dad, mum."

Lily was beaming at James, and Harry quickly slipped off and moved up to the train, hesitant to get on. The corridors were extremely small, and he didn't want to bump into someone. He was encountering reactions less and less, but they were still frightening and all the more painful for the inconsistency. Up the train, Blaise quickly leaned out the window and whistled. Harry looked up and made his way to the nearest door. Salvador and Neville were waiting to snag his trunk and lead the way inside. Once they were seated, Harry laughed softly.

"I didn't need an escort, you know."

"You wanted one, though, and it's for the best. We don't need to scare the poor little students. What if some first year bumped into you and was scarred for life?" Neville chuckled.

"Well, there is that. Don't you need to be in the prefect's compartment?"

"My stuff's up there, same as Blaise." Neville shrugged. "We'll head on up in a while. We're waiting for Alan to finish greeting Luna before we leave."

"Hermione already up there?"

Blaise answered when Neville hesitated. "Yeah, she's up there and studiously ignoring Padma." Blaise glanced aside and then continued, "She's also chatting up Anthony Goldstein."

Harry cursed mentally again. Oh, great. This was not going to be pretty. "I suppose that's fine." Harry offered neutrally. "Is everyone else here as well?"

"Lucille's up in the prefect's car already." Salvador shrugged. "I'm waiting here, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." Harry smiled. "I don't really care who all's in here so long as it's not too crowded."

Salvador nodded. "It'll likely be you, Alan, and me only for the time being, unless Luna didn't make prefect."

"She didn't." Alan answered, striding in. Luna was, predictably, on his arm and beaming, her wand stuck behind her ear. "And you two should probably get up there. The train should be heading out. No need to suffer a lecture, eh?"

"No need." Blaise agreed. He then took hold of Neville's shoulder and hauled him out, starting in on him immediately, "And I don't care if you're pouting, you're going whether you like it or not ..."

Harry frowned after them as they left, but shook himself free from it. Neville brought the loss upon himself. The whistle sounded, and Harry took the empty seat across from Alan, Luna and Salvador. Luna was playing with the wand in her hands; Harry thought for a moment it looked different than the one she'd had before, but dismissed the thought. Harry finally looked back at Salvador.

"How is everything between you and Lucille?"

Surprisingly, Salvador smiled warmly. "It's actually very good. She'll be splitting from her family as soon as she has her NEWTs, so that will clear up a lot of her anxiety."

"Does it help to have the Hodges behind you?" Harry asked, curious.

Salvador blinked, then nodded. "What made you think that?"

"If she's from an old family, I've heard a lot of scary things about what might be done to keep the children in line. Sirius knows a lot of them." Harry watched Salvador's face flinch. A glance at Alan showed him to be curious and not scared, and Luna was toying with her wand, apparently not paying the slightest attention to the conversation. "Was there a curse Lucille ran into? She looked a bit sad at Blaise's house."

Salvador also glanced around the compartment before nodding shortly. "A curse. She can't get pregnant right now because of it – it just ... aborts. As pissed off as she was at the risk ... she hadn't wanted that. Her family refuses to lift it, but Jonas is positive about the Hodges' ability to break it. She'll be coming over there with me during Christmas, as her family refused to allow her out with anyone but a 'trusted' family over the summer."

"That seemed to be the case for several of you to get to Blaise's." Alan observed quietly. "Raina had the same problem."

"Raina is suffering." Luna observed shortly. "A trail of tears."

"Do you know anything more about it?" Alan lightly asked.

Luna however, turned dreamy again and simply answered, "No. It will be as it will be, by luck or love or guile."

Alan nodded sadly, and then grabbed Luna's hand. "Would you stop playing with your wand like that? You keep making me think you're going to hurt someone."

"It's not my old wand." Luna beamed. "It listens to me quite well. Have you ever heard of the Deathstick?"

Alan looked confused, Salvador sceptical.

Harry just laughed. "Luna, that's a child's tale."

"What tale is that?" Alan queried. "I've never heard it."

"The Deathly Hallows." Harry smirked. "It's about three brothers who meet Death after crossing a river. Each of them asks for a gift for their 'ingenuity' at foiling him with the rapids. One gets an unbeatable wand, the Elder wand or Deathstick. Another gets a resurrection stone, and the last asks for Death's Invisibility cloak."

Alan's eyebrows were raised. "Well. Impressive."

"The catch to the story is that the first brother gets murdered in his bed for the wand, and the second gets only a shade of the dead back." Salvador finished. "So when he tried to bring back his first love, he gets so depressed he kills himself. The last brother made the wisest choice and lived long and happy until his time came." He snorted. "You know, the usual."

Luna merely hummed and tucked the wand back behind her ear, a smile on her face. Harry wondered if she was taking refuge in audacity, and then shook his head. Where on earth would she have found the thing anyways? You had to kill someone to get that wand.

Either way, the trip went fairly quietly. After a few hours of quiet discussion and a bit of awkwardness, their door was pushed open and Lucille entered, beaming at Salvador, followed by a quiet Neville. Harry was curious, but didn't ask about his silence, instead waving him down beside him as Lucille happily sat herself on Salvador's lap.

"Did you check on Connor while you were out and about?" Harry asked. Neville's little brother was starting Hogwarts this year.

"Yeah, he's sitting with Melanie, Nanna and Dillan and two other first years, including Catrin." Neville smiled. "He's a little peeved at sitting with his sister, but the other girl he was sitting with was very interested when I poked my head in."

Harry snorted. "We get far too much publicity. Where's everyone else? I know it's impossible to sit together with how widespread we are but ..."

"Ron's with Hannah, Susan, and Kevin," Harry felt a minor twinge but hastily brushed it away, "and Blaise and Ginny are sitting with Daphne, Tracey, and three first years as well. I think one of them was Lucille's little brother, and another was one of Stephanie's friend's little sister from what they said. The last introduced himself as Tyler Redgrave, but I don't know him."

"I do." Salvador nodded. "He's a Baker. Amos' godchild, but his parents got killed recently so he's an orphan along with his two siblings."

"Fair enough." Neville nodded. Salvador continued to think.

"Was the girl with your little brother black-haired?"

"Yeah." Neville answer. "Looked rather bossy, too."

"That's probably Sable Hodges." Salvador smiled. "Wonder why she's sitting with your siblings?"

Harry thought he had a guess. Jonas had probably mentioned them, and if he had made a point of befriending the older group, he'd have an estimate of their power. Magical strength was a matter of inheritance. With how strong Harry and Neville were, their siblings were just as likely to be significant, and 'potential allies'.

He still hadn't managed that talk. Harry pouted and determined to ask in his next letter home. Wasn't as good as face to face, but it took some doing to forget over an entire summer. Admittedly, his had been very busy –

A phantom memory of cool silver holding his wrist in a crushing grip made him quickly rub the sensation away. It didn't immediately leave, and he shuddered. Wormtail was dead. He wasn't going to be held down by him again for someone's sick entertainment, much less –

"How's the Quidditch going?" Harry asked, not caring he was interrupting someone. Salvador and Lucille looked confused for a moment, but Neville quickly understood, and Alan smiled weakly.

"What, you still not interested in Quodpot?" He teased.

"After having it blow up in my face during your ill-conceived mixture of the games?" Harry shot back. "I don't think so. I'll leave that kind of idiocy to Sirius."

Someone knocked on the compartment door and it was pulled open by a breathless third year girl. She glanced inside and panted, "I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter?" She asked carefully.

Harry and Neville exchanged looks, Neville's confused and Harry's suspicious. Harry gently accepted them and handed Neville his, quickly opening the velvet tie. Inside, the letter was succinct and to the point:

Mr. Potter,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bit of lunch in Compartment C.

Sincerely,

Professor H. E. F. Slughorn

"Is yours the same?" Neville asked, leaning over to look. He tilted his own letter, and Harry glanced at it and nodded. "You plan on going?"

"Why not?" Harry asked. "You'll be there as well, and we can leave if we ever have to. I'm sure he'll understand."

"How are you so sure?"

"My dad warned me before I got on here. He's the new Potions teacher."

Neville blinked. "Then what's Snape teaching?"

Harry's look asked Neville blatantly, 'Are-you-stupid?' After a moment, during which Alan was snickering, Neville quietly went, "Oh," and blushed. "Right. Shall we go, then?"

Harry shrugged. "Why not?"

"Why didn't he send me a letter?" Alan asked carefully.

Harry paused, and glanced at Neville. “I think we possibly got the letters because of our parents. I’d be willing to bet you’ll get an invite sometime while we’re at school. These compartments do tend to be small, so he had to pick only certain people.”

Alan nodded slowly. “Fair enough. See you, then?”

Harry nodded back, smiling cautiously, and following Neville through the corridors up to compartment C. While the corridors were quite packed with students, Neville easily manoeuvred himself so that the masses parted around him to leave Harry in a pocket of space. Harry maintained a short glare of his own that ensured anyone ruffled by it moved aside. It worked on most everyone, save for when they passed Pansy. She, entirely purposefully, ran into Harry after Neville moved her aside, having pretended to trip. Harry thought he might collapse, but after the shock passed, he felt nothing and pushed her off him and clean into the wall aside. Harry snarled.

“Just because you got told to be an ass, Pansy, doesn’t mean you’re going to get away with it!”

Neville glared back at her and added, “Get moving, Pansy, or have you forgotten I’m a prefect?”

“I tripped!” She snapped. “You can’t punish me for that!”

“I know several people who can fake better than that, so don’t try and fool me.” Neville coldly informed her. “Get back to your own compartment. Next time you try that, I’ll penalize you.”

“A Gryffindor, abusing his status?” Pansy scoffed. “Remarkable.”

Neville smiled coldly and waved Harry forward, ignoring her. Slughorn’s compartment was just ahead, and when they knocked, the door was thrown open. The professor beamed at them, but it didn’t stop his significant presence from sending a shiver down Harry’s spine. He wasn’t a particularly intimidating man – no, the presence was the bulk he had: he was quite fat. A mild comfort was that he was about the same height as Harry himself was, although Harry probably

would have found his enormous moustache a bit disturbing on a normal day.

"Harry Potter! Delightful! And Neville Longbottom, both of you, welcome. Come in, sit down and join us!" He stepped back against the mostly empty seat on one side, and waved them to the other seat, where two boys were already seated. One shared Slughorn's seat, and Harry was surprised to recognize him: Blaise Zabini. In turn, Blaise had the same basic response, and immediately turned a sharp look on the boys seated on the other side.

When Slughorn moved to begin introductions, Blaise immediately spoke up. "Professor, I'm sure you read about Harry's misfortune earlier this summer. It'd be better if he sat over here with Neville and I. Sometimes he runs into trouble upon contact. Unless one of the other boys would rather move over here ..."

One of the boys in question frowned at Blaise. "Why can't Neville or Harry alone just join you?"

"Because I don't trust someone else next to him." Neville and Blaise answered in synch, and Professor Slughorn laughed. Harry suspected neither wanted to point out that Slughorn took up far too much of one of the seats for Harry to be comfortable sharing with him and another.

"Such a wonderful set of friends, and most surprising. By all means, Neville, you may have my seat along with Harry. Only thing to be done for such brazen students. I presume you and Blaise are friends?"

The professor immediately sat beside the other two boys. Apparently seventh years, they were relatively squashed by the lack of space, as the one who had complained was built quite wide. Harry was more than grateful for the allowance – even with only three people on the seats, the appropriate number for the space, the proximity was still closer than he would have liked. However, as they were settled, Slughorn immediately addressed everyone again.

"Well then, I'm sure you two know Blaise Zabini as you so warmly welcomed each other, but these two you might have run into, Marcus Belby and Cormac McLaggen. No?"

Belby looked nervous in their presence, and McLaggen was frowning heavily between them and Blaise. Harry hadn't met either, although he was fairly sure he'd run into McLaggen before in the halls or the common room. He gave a polite nod, and then accepted the napkin Slughorn offered him with another polite smile. Slughorn was watching all three of them carefully, and then immediately pulled down a lunch tray.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," Slughorn cosily smiled. "A chance to get to know you all a bit better. I've packed my own lunch; the trolley, as I remember it, is heavy on liquorice wands, which do no good for an old man's digestion. Pheasant, Belby?"

Marcus Belby jumped as half a cold pheasant was thrust under his nose, hesitantly accepting it as Slughorn moved to pass around rolls.

"I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles," Slughorn told Harry and Neville. "Outstanding wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?"

Belby immediately choked on the bite of pheasant he'd taken, and nearly turned purple before Slughorn caught him with a spell to clear his throat. Harry wondered if that had been purposeful or not, but doubted it. Slughorn didn't seem the type.

"Not ... not much of him, no." Belby managed.

"Well, of course, I daresay he's busy," Slughorn continued, giving Belby a curious look. "I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion without considerable hard work!"

"I suppose, ..." Belby offered, watching Slughorn carefully. "He ... he and my dad don't get on very well, you see, so I don't really know him well ..."

Slughorn's smile turned cold and Harry immediately got a very good idea of what his intentions with the gathering were. Harry watched him turn and address McLaggen immediately.

"Now you, Cormac, I happen to know you see a lot of your uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather splendid picture of the two of you hunting nogtails in Norfolk, correct?"

McLaggen grinned. "Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was. We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour – this was before he was Minister, obviously –"

"Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus, too?" beamed Slughorn, now offering a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was missed. "Now tell me, did he teach you much of his skills?"

While Harry might be willing to listen to Slughorn, he found McLaggen tiresome. Just because his uncle was quite quick with his charms and curses didn't mean Harry wanted to hear the rundown of it. Besides, Neville knew half of them already and the rest didn't sound very useful. Of course, his headache might have added to his impatience and distraction...

"Ahh, thank you." Slughorn finished. "And Blaise, I trust your mother is doing well? Her last husband expired rather suddenly two years ago, now?"

"Three." Blaise answered tiredly. "He really should have been more careful, but I suppose not everyone anticipates the sort of things that might be found in such an old house." Blaise quickly buffed his nails on his shirt and smiled meaninglessly at Slughorn.

"My word, you must have the most interesting house." Slughorn continued. "How old is it?"

"Nine centuries. It's been redone a few times, the last time the interior was completely remodelled was in the late eighteenth century."

Harry was certainly curious about that. Blaise's house had looked quite nice; comparable to the Potter home, which had last been

redone at about the same time. The structure of Potter Manor wasn't quite so old, though – only four centuries. Neville also listened with interest.

Slughorn passed around another tray. Harry didn't even look before dismissing it – his headache was making his nauseous. He was seriously considering leaving, but didn't mind listening to a bit more about Blaise.

"I see. That was her seventh husband now? Your mother is indeed the catch – I remember teaching her in classes, none of the boys could pay much attention without a firm hand. She played them like a pro indeed. They got quite out of hand. How are you and your sisters?"

"My half-sisters are quite pleased with the arrangements, and my mother is most devastated that the men still cannot keep themselves in line." Blaise answered dully. Clearly the topic didn't matter to him.

"I'd say they cannot. I remember the duel several years ago –"

"Husband number four vs. number five." Blaise muttered, just loud enough for Harry and Neville to catch. Harry fought down a smile. Oh, that sounded like Blaise. Harry would feel sorry for the men if they weren't so stupid as to fall for it, much less leaving all their money to her.

"- Well, that was over in a jiffy and he won her regard only to fall several years later to poison berries out in the wilds."

"It was a grave loss for me." Blaise answered with a carefully sad tone. "Tinashe was my father."

"Such a pity." Slughorn finished. "At least you still have your mother, indeed?"

Blaise just nodded silently, and Slughorn gave him another smile before turning to Neville. "And you, Neville. I must say I was most pleasantly surprised to hear the rumours going around, such genius! They say, indeed. I took the liberty to glance at your records through

the years, and my word. Severus has been much the taskmaster to you all, and your skill still shines through most delightfully. You have truly acquired your parents skill.”

Neville’s smile was cold; he hated being judged like that. Slughorn had certainly started out on the wrong foot with Neville, although it wasn’t entirely surprising. “I am blessed to be so keen in my classes. I found the OWLs sadly disappointing. They weren’t much of a challenge at all.” Harry fought not to laugh as Slughorn beamed at Neville, and Belby and McLaggen frowned. The only reason Blaise wasn’t frowning was because he was acting. Neville was also; a faint line on his brow indicated he was displeased and hiding it. He hadn’t managed to work that small indication away. “I’m looking forward to your Potions class.”

“Ah, I’m sorry to say I won’t be teaching fifth year and above this year.” Slughorn shook his head sadly. “I’m splitting with another Potions Master, Master Quintelyuv. He’s taking a sabbatical from his normal work in Salem and accepting the chance to examine the work of another two Masters in Hogwarts, even though Severus will be taking the Defence class.”

Neville didn’t hide his shock. Harry was in agreement. Green, teaching? It didn’t sound like him at all. Blaise glanced at both of them, and then finally gave in and asked.

“Why are you two so shocked? Do you know him?”

“Green taught Alan.” Harry added.

“Green? Professor Slughorn said Master Quintelyuv …”

“Would you want that name hollered down the halls?” Neville drawled.

Blaise blinked and then shook his head. “You’ll have to call him by his name in class, you know.”

“I doubt it.” Harry laughed. “He’s not that formal.”

"You know Master Quintelyuv?" Slughorn asked curiously. "When did you meet him?"

"He's shown up several times." Harry answered. "He's a good friend of Alan Prince, and when Alan got hurt by the basilisk in second year he came through to help save his life. I met him again at the Quidditch World Cup, and then once more this summer when I went to visit Salem. He ... doesn't seem inclined to teaching students." Harry added. Actually, he was more concerned about Green being sane enough to keep a classroom safe, but Dumbledore must know what he was doing – and he doubted Amaranth would allow his brother to teach if he didn't think him capable.

"Such luck for you. I haven't met the man personally yet, but his work is most remarkable."

"And explosive." Neville muttered.

"What did you say?" Slughorn asked Neville, curious now. "Do you know him as well?"

"Not as much as Harry does, but I met him over the summer and I know he taught Alan." Neville answered.

"Alan Prince, hm? You both mentioned him several times. Another friend?"

"Alan Prince is Professor Snape's son." McLaggen shot. "He's a big power in Slytherin – half the house seems to answer to him. Potter buddied up to him through half of last year, along with his friends."

"Oh ho!" Slughorn beamed. "An interhouse friendship? Those are something remarkable. I don't remember such a wonderful tie happening very often at all. Harry, you must have some remarkable friends!"

Harry shrugged. "It's nothing. They're just my friends. Alan and Neville are my friends, but so are Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Susan Bones, and Hermione Granger."

"Much like your father, there." Slughorn beamed. "He had such the group of friends in school, and such skilled wizards, skilled indeed. And to marry Lily; why, she was the smartest witch in her year. You seem to be their child in every way. And the papers say you're already testing your mettle alongside your friends. My dear Ministry friends, why I've heard from so many of them, they all tell me they found the recovered images from last year most fascinating – you, yourself, fighting against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Slughorn looked most interested in this fact. "Most remarkable."

"I wasn't there alone." Harry defended quickly. "And I'd had to – one of my friends got hurt by him, and he needed to be stopped." Neville snickered next to him, and Harry elbowed him firmly in the side. "You were there too, Neville!"

Neville's face fell for a moment, but he quickly picked himself up. "Well, yes, but I was sane and stuck to only taking down one of the Death Eaters. Unlike you, who decided to take a shot at the big Evil Dark Lord himself."

Harry sniffed delicately. "What, he was there, and I was looking for a fight. He offered."

Both Blaise and Neville dissolved into snickers, both at Harry's pompous tone and Slughorn and the boys gaping looks at the disrespect Harry had.

"That is remarkable news." Slughorn managed. "However, I don't believe anyone has a full measure on who was present, and what happened, either. Might I tempt you into sharing this remarkable experience of yours?"

"Possibly," Harry interjected before Neville or Blaise could tell him to shove it, "but sir, I'm sorry to beg off, but I have a headache. It's a remnant from my captivity this summer, and I'd really prefer to be off, and for my safety I'm going to have to kidnap Neville as well. You remember, I'm sure, the classic torture spell, making any contact hurt, and I really don't want to scar some first year just because the train rocked."

Slughorn nodded immediately. "By all means, I don't need to hold you here when you're in pain. I'll be seeing you plenty of times later this year – we have the entire year to talk and get to know each other. If you would feel more safe, I'm sure I can spare Blaise as well; such good friends, he wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all." Blaise answered with true pleasure. "Thank you again for inviting me."

"It was such a lovely lunch, with it so dark out you should all return to your compartments. Thank you, see you at the school."

Harry left quickly, Neville before him and Blaise behind. Harry sighed with relief and rubbed his forehead tiredly. Neville blinked at him.

"You really have a headache?"

"Yeah." Harry winced. "It's pretty bad, but I think its just stress. I didn't expect coming to school would make me so tense, but the crowds are just doing me in."

Blaise nodded understandingly. "Well, you've got a good group in Gryffindor, so just stick by them and you should be just fine."

"Thanks Blaise." Harry smiled honestly. Neville snorted.

"Yes, thank you for the confidence, Blaise."

A/N: *Makes strangling motions* Okay. So, my apologies, but it's late, and I don't have time to reread over this again today and correct my mistakes. Please forgive me, but it's 's damn fault for forgetting I was signed in once I'd finished the damn read-through. My sincere apologies.

And yes, it is still Thursday!

So, yes. Train. School. Students. Slughorn - and others! Conflict, terror, horrifying, and joy. I'm sure it'll be far more interesting when we actually get something happening. Kinda like that rat... *grins* Yes, enjoy. Thank you. Looking forward to next week. Are you?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-three

There wasn't much left to the trip. Alan was curious about Slughorn, and laughed when they said Green was going to be teaching. He reassured them that Green could teach and do so safely – he was probably getting sent here by his brothers in order for him to heal and not hurt himself again. Chances are his options were teach, or solitary confinement. Harry could see why he'd chosen teaching.

Leaving the train proved almost eventful. Between his companions, Harry struggled to make it to the carriage and, upon entering he put his head between his knees and still nearly succumbed to a panic attack. The crowds were making him feel ill – he doubted he'd eat much at the feast – but he didn't want to miss it. Neville sighed heavily and glared out the window for most of the trip. When they stepped out, Alan, Salvador and Lucille followed them as far as they could, but they split to sit down at the Slytherin table as they passed it. Luna glanced forward and pointed.

"If you need Hermione, she's right there. Ronald is just coming up behind you."

Harry glanced forward and swore thickly. Hermione was about two steps away from kissing Anthony Goldstein. A glance at Neville proved he had skipped Hermione and was firmly waving Ron and Ginny over – Harry took it upon himself to address Hermione, especially after he narrowly avoided getting bumped into by a second year.

"Hey, Hermione! Get over here, would you?"

Hermione looked up, ticked, but noticed Harry was the one calling and not Neville. She took several minutes to make up to Anthony about it, but Harry was having none of it. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, and Hermione stiffened and stalked over.

"What was that for, Harry? I was talking to Anthony!" She hissed.

"That's lovely." Harry said, and he meant it. "However, I'm busy trying not to scar some first year because they ran into me. And while I'd

love to not inconvenience you with my current handicap, I think it's a something a friend would do to help me and not have a fit just because you're trying to make a highly unnecessary point, especially when you had agreed to help keep an eye out previously. If you feel helping will get in your way, then rescind your offer and just leave." Harry bit his lip and turned away. He was being snappy, and it was out of line. He softened his tone, and continued, "I'm sorry Hermione. I suppose we're all still a little sore from last year, but I do mean what I said. I hate this, and while this wasn't a problem on the train because I could have Alan and his help, when it's only Gryffindors I'm relatively limited to just you, Neville, and Ron and possible Seamus and Dean - especially when classes start. Please Hermione, I'm glad you're finding a boyfriend but don't ignore me for it when I need you."

"I'm sorry." Hermione deflated. "I ... I was just thinking ..."

"That I would take offence?" Neville offered. Hermione stiffened, but didn't correct him. "I left you, Hermione, not the other way around. I'm not going to be offended if you choose someone else after my mistakes. I will be offended if you choose someone else over helping Harry when you gave your word, though."

"Alright. C'mon." Hermione walked forward, leading the small group. Nanna came up beside Harry and took his hand carefully, beaming when Harry gave her a small smile. Melanie, behind them with Ginny and Ron, also brought up conversation in place of the awkwardness Harry, Neville, and Hermione were suffering, up to and through their seat at the middle of the table. Shortly after they'd sat down, Madam Pomfrey stood from the staff table and stalked over to them. She sent a short glare down at Harry, but asked kindly,

"Are you alright, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Pomfrey, I'm fine." Harry smiled. "I've got a bit of a headache, but nothing much."

Pomfrey fished a phial out of her pocket and handed it over. "I suspected as much. Tension?" Harry nodded. "Drink this before bed, then. It's a calming potion and should help you sleep. And ... here." She offered up a small pouch. "Inside are four half-doses of

Dreamless sleep. You are only to use these if you wake in the middle of the night, before two, do you understand? They'll last four hours. And only one of them at a time. When you've used them up, come to me and I'll determine if you need more. You will inform me of every night you've used one, do you understand? And if you ever feel the need, my doors are open at any time. Even if you need to leave class, provided you come straight to me."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey." Harry nodded. Pomfrey frowned one more time and stalked back up to the staff table. Harry pocketed the pouch and the calming draught. He'd been taking a full dose of dreamless sleep off and on during the summer. Half-doses sounded weak, but he knew there was a risk of dependency. He refuses to rely on a drug, so he suffered through the nightmares and fought off the tiredness he was left with through force of will, and occasional nights free of dreams, through drugs or luck. None of his friends commented on it, although Hermione was unable to keep a softly pitying look from her face. He stubbornly ignored it, and glanced at the door, where the students continued to trickle in. Once they were all in, the Sorting would commence...

Harry was really only interested in a few students, and as the song was much the same as last year, with a bit of a positive lilt on the friendships, Harry didn't pay it much mind. The sorting didn't become interesting until the summons of 'Growman, Faith'.

Ginny immediately spoke up, "Wasn't there a Growman amongst Stephanie's friends?"

"Yes." Harry nodded. The hat wasn't on her head long before she went into Slytherin.

"Poor girl." Nanna offered. "There's some mean kids in the underclassmen."

"Like that boy you pick fights with?" Neville offered. "I still remember, you know."

"You remember everything!" Nanna complained.

"What boy? Nanna, I haven't heard of you getting into fights." Harry wondered, bewildered. Had he just completely missed it?

"That's because Kozumplik – Raina's little brother that's in Nanna's year – won't tell." Ginny answered. "Doesn't say word one about it."

"Hodges, Sable."

Harry immediately looked up as a black-haired girl with rather intense curls sat down on the stool and accepted the hat. Neville frowned. "I do hope she's not as miserable as Jonas."

"That would take effort." Ron added. "I don't think anybody liked Jonas."

"Your brothers like him well enough." Harry absently commented, waiting to see where the girl would go.

"Yeah, well, the twins are crazy." Ron shrugged. "Nothing to be done about that. Where is she likely to go?"

"Most Hodges are Ravenclaws or Slytherins." Harry offered. "I think your brothers are employing the only Gryffindor Hodges, currently."

"She's taking a while." Melanie added. "C'mon, get sorted. I wanna know where Connor's going."

Harry smiled faintly, and watched for the hat to straighten. It finally did so, and called out, "Ravenclaw!"

Harry clapped with the rest of the school, and waited out the next few students between Sable and Connor Longbottom. Neville's brother sat down with a nervous smile on his face, and waited several minutes as well before becoming a Hufflepuff. Neville laughed gleefully, "Oh, that is so Connor!"

"Completely expected, was it?" Harry asked, curiously.

"Not really; he could have been either Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. He certainly wasn't Slytherin, and I didn't think he'd make Gryffindor, but

Ravenclaw was a stretch. He'll be happy there, certainly. No pressure to live up to anything but sticking by your friends."

"That's always a good thing." Harry smiled.

"He's good at that." Melanie smiled, before both her expression and Neville's collapsed in remembrance. Harry didn't ask; he suspected he might know. Neville had been attacked at his home last Christmas, and his siblings had run across him in the time afterwards. Harry could only imagine how he'd lashed out at them and driven them completely batty with the unexpected hostility. He'd been a complete terror when he'd returned to school.

Hermione pulled them out of it with a soft word, "Hey, isn't Lucille's last name Pupp?"

"Yes." Harry quickly answered. "Why?"

"The boy sitting up there, he's Grant Pupp."

Harry blinked, and eyed him. He looked like a decent kid, and was smiling awkwardly under the hat, probably biting his lip.

"He was sitting in my compartment." Ginny spoke up. "He seems nice."

"Gryffindor!"

There was less clapping from the houses than expected. Lucille's mother had made her husband's name notorious: Gryffindor wasn't her kind of house. Grant walked down the aisle, moving to the edge of the new Gryffindors who hadn't been hailed further down, when Ginny waved at him. He hesitantly waved back, but still sat with the others. Ginny shrugged.

"Thought I'd offer. Can't be all bad if he made it into Gryffindor."

"That's fine." Harry smiled. "I'd have easily welcomed him for the time being at least."

The name following Grant's was unknown, but after him was "Redgrave, Tyler" Harry shushed the others, "Salvador said he was a Baker –" He managed, before the hat shouted, "Gryffindor."

"You sure about that?" Neville queried, eyebrow raised with amusement. Tyler immediately sat next to Grant, striking up a warm conversation.

Harry stuck out his tongue. "He was the godson of one of the Hodges, from what Salvador said. He's not a Hodges; he's a Baker. There's a difference." Harry sniffed snootily for emphasis.

"Anyone else to listen for?" Hermione asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. "Emmeline's daughter. She'll be one of the last."

It was a fair number of names before Catrin Vance was sorted. The houses were fairly full – the children being sorted were still those born in the hope and glory of the end of the first war, when people imagined they'd see peace, not war. Catrin went into Slytherin, much to their surprise, and only one other boy was sorted before Dumbledore stood and invited them to tuck in. Harry did so with interest, if not gusto. He wasn't particularly hungry, and didn't have much to say. He'd seen his friends several times over the summer, and the discussion during the sorting had been fine for him. He wanted it over with; he still had that headache.

Food made time pass quickly, alongside the discussion of the new first years. Before long, the food disappeared and Dumbledore stood to address the Hall, gaining his usual silence.

"The very best of evenings to you! Now ... to our new students, welcome. To our old students, welcome back."

The greeting was utterly normal – except for the exclusion of banned items. Instead, Dumbledore moved into Quidditch, announcing the freeing of the position of commentator, and then into the staff appointments.

"I'm quite sorry to say that Filch proved an inadequate caretaker last year and has been released of his post." The announcement was met with several guttural agreements, and a grim smile from Harry, Neville, and Ginny. "His place will be taken for the short-term by Sybilla Harper, newly graduated of Durmstrang, until we find a new permanent caretaker. She maintains that all the old bans remain in effect and wishes me to mention she is indeed magical and therefore is not going to be quite as easy a target as Filch was."

Harry couldn't help but laugh with Neville at the veiled threat. Up the table, Harry noticed Tyler wave eagerly and Sybilla, standing at attention at the staff table, gave him a stiff nod, with a small smile. He subsided and immediately moved to talk under his breath to Grant beside him.

"We are pleased to welcome two new teachers to staff, who will be splitting the teaching of Potions between them. Professor Slughorn," The man stood without much effect and Harry felt a bit of foreboding in the similarity to Umbridge, something he quickly brushed off, "is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions Master."

"Potions?"

"Potions?"

It was amusing to watch Ron and Hermione panic, as he and Neville already had that news. Ginny was just smiling wryly and whispering with Melanie and Nanna. Neville shortly whispered the obvious to Hermione who quickly became thoughtful.

"Secondly, there will be another Potions Master on loan for this year, Master Quintelyuv." Green, sitting beside Severus, stood with a strained smile. "He will be taking the fifth through seventh year classes."

"In the meantime," Dumbledore merely talked over the frantic murmurs. "Professor Snape will be taking over the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Ron gaped, and Harry made a point to consider it, as he had neglected to do when Slughorn mentioned it. This would prove interesting. Snape had wanted the job – Alan had mentioned it, and apparently he'd finally succeeded. After a moment, Harry glanced up at Ron's frantic expression and frowned. "Ron, really. Calm down. He can't deny you entrance and you're better at Defence than you are at Potions."

"What about ... Master Quintelyuv?" Ron managed with disgust. He clearly didn't like the title, but was unsure what to use since Dumbledore had used it.

"Master Quintelyuv is Green." Neville pointed out. "You met him, remember?"

"Not much." Ron groused. "You two met him a lot better than I did, running over to visit. I got stuck cleaning house."

Harry shrugged, "Yeah, well, that trip was nice up until the return trip. I think Green will be a pretty good teacher."

"If he doesn't blow something up." Neville amended.

Dumbledore cleared his throat to return attention to the front table. Harry hushed the others and glanced around. The move was clearly unpopular – not a lot of people liked Severus as a teacher, and Harry did hope he did better as a Defence teacher than as a Potions teacher. Dumbledore simply patiently waited until the return of silence and then moved past the staff appointments to more pressing news.

"Now, as everybody in this hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength."

This portent drew the strain in the room ever tighter – not many students wanted to face it, and an uncomfortable shudder moved across the hall. Harry scowled at the table. He didn't need a reminder, thank you very much, but it was needed for everyone else. It didn't mean he liked it though...

"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure we are safe. The castle's magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that your teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them – in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of bed after hours. I implore you that should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others' safety."

Dumbledore's blue eyes swept the tables before he smiled once more, leaving Harry wondering why he hadn't focused on anybody – there were still some notorious rule-breakers, not the least of which was himself and Alan. Maybe ... nah. He wouldn't. They didn't need any encouragement, really.

"But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say good night. Pip pip!"

The tables left quickly, Neville and Hermione shrugging off and leading the first years up to the dorms. Ginny begged off to stay with Nanna, Melanie and Ron in keeping Harry in a pool of calm. He insisted on waiting behind for most of the crowd to dissipate before he left. Hagrid came up behind them with a wide smile.

"Harry! Good to see ye! Dumbledore said ye were hurt, are ye doin' fine?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed quietly. "I'm doing great, and looking forward to your class."

Hagrid beamed. "I can't wait to see ye there, with all yer friends."

"It'll probably just be me Hagrid." Harry shrugged. "Ron might be joining me, though. You know how it is; there's so many classes to take, they couldn't find room."

Hagrid looked crestfallen, but picked himself back up quickly. "That's good, I know 'ow bad the classes are. So many options, they can't take everythin'."

Harry smiled weakly. "How's everything with you?"

"Good, good." Hagrid glanced at Harry's friends, but the hall was quite empty now. Harry was planning on leaving shortly, himself. He was feeling tired and wanted to put his headache to rest. "I was talkin' with Grawp earlier. He's doin' quite well. Dumbledore found him a place, a big cave. He's doin' mighty well. I'm thinking of training 'im up as my assistant."

"That's great, Hagrid. Keep in mind, though, he's huge." Harry cautioned. "That's really intimidating for most of us, you know?"

Hagrid blinked but nodded sagely. "Very true, very true. Ye need to get ter bed, then, Harry. See ye in class then?"

"Yeah." Harry grinned. "I'll see you then, if my brain hasn't fallen out of my ears."

Hagrid actually gave a loud, booming laugh and left, still chuckling. Harry shrugged to the others and wandered out of the Great Hall. He wasn't far before Nanna demanded an explanation of Grawp, which lasted until they reached the common room. Harry managed to get through and collapse on his bed, downing the calming potion and almost immediately falling asleep.

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Harry did sleep relatively well – he woke early, covered in sweat and unable to remember the dream that had woken him. He couldn't talk himself into going back to sleep, and gave up to read through his Arithmancy text; it was five in the morning, anyways. That was the class he was least certain about being able to pass, but he did want

to at least try. About an hour later, Neville and the others woke, finding him already dressed, sitting on his bed reading. Neville was less than pleased, but he understood. He didn't mention it as they went down to meet the girls, and had apparently talked Ron into not questioning it.

Down at breakfast, however, Ron immediately began to quietly praise the whole periods of freedom up until Neville snorted.

"Yeah, I do hope you enjoy your study time." He glanced back down at his OWLs and shook his head. "I'm going to die miserably alongside Hermione, Harry, Alan and Blaise. None of us are going to have any free time."

"Huh? What's going to happen to yours?"

"The rest of us are idiots." Harry offered with a smile. "We're taking on full schedules. I'm considering dropping a class or two but I want to see what the workload is like first."

Ron blinked. "Oh. That is going to make things a little difficult." Hermione, Neville, and Harry just laughed, and Ron immediately straightened, turning to a pompous tone. "Never fear, I shall do my best to advise you during the rare and beautiful hours you have free."

He succeeded in rendering all three of his friends into fits of laughter, much to McGonagall's amusement as she sent Parvati on her way, ignoring the dirty look the girl shot at their group. She quietly cleared her throat, and Neville handed her his OWL scores and his decisions. She looked it over and smiled.

"My my, Neville. I'm disappointed." Neville glanced up at her with a raised eyebrow. "You got an E."

"It was in History, ma'am." Neville answered cheekily. "Really. How am I supposed to learn when the teacher is insubstantial?"

"Indeed." McGonagall tapped a blank schedule and handed it down to Neville. "I'm most pleased to have you continuing my class, Neville. Carry on. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron nervously handed over his schedule and got a smile in return and a quick approval of his chosen classes. Ron was delighted with his schedule. He had free periods every day, and no class that morning. Harry waved McGonagall over to Hermione at Neville's silent insistence, and Hermione was cleared for the same classes as Neville with a brilliant smile from McGonagall at Hermione's straight O scores. Both of them bid Harry and Ron goodbye. Their first class was Ancient Runes and Harry wasn't taking that class. Harry handed his schedule over for a similar smile from McGonagall.

"An Outstanding in Transfiguration, Harry. I'm positively delighted." She glanced down his choices and nodded sharply. "Good work. I hope you enjoy your classes, and am quite looking forward to seeing you. Also, Harry, twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for Quidditch trials."

"Thank you." Harry grinned. "I'll tell you when I can get that together, although that seems a tad foolish with my workload."

"I trust you can manage it, Mr. Potter, and take your time. I know you're supposed to be careful for the next month or so." She gave him a sad smile and tapped a blank schedule and handed it over. "You're clear for all your choices."

Harry glanced over it and groaned; Ron laughed.

"What are you so upset about?"

"I've been up since five, and I don't have a class this morning. Not to mention I'm pretty much trapped until Wednesday."

Ron just laughed. Harry huffed and sighed. "Well, I suppose I should start plotting out how to manage the trials." Harry eyed Ron and raised his eyebrow. "You'd better beat all the hopeful keepers, you know. I don't want to train some idiot to work with everyone, right?"

Ron nodded confidently. "No problem. I've got more time to practice than you do, although I will say you've got plenty of skill so you won't be inconvenienced by your grounding at least."

"There is that." Harry nodded. "Let's go up to the common room and let me make sure I've got everything together. What classes do we have today?"

Ron glanced down. "I've got Defence, Care of Magical Creatures and Potions. What about you?"

"Same, plus Arithmancy." Harry shrugged. "Well, better get everything together. I should be running trials in a week or so."

Ron nodded and followed him upstairs.

An hour later, they were back down several floors and waiting for Hermione and the Slytherins outside of the Defence classroom. Hermione came up, chatting avidly with Anthony Goldstein. Neville was managing to pretend not to sulk fairly decently – had he not been walking just one step behind Blaise on the side opposite Hermione. Harry suppressed the desire to chuckle weakly at his friend's antics, and turned to give Alan a bright smile. Alan smiled back, but walked over and collapsed against the wall with a huge sigh.

"Ye gads!" He gasped. "So much freakin' homework! I think they're trying to drown us!"

"It can't have been that bad." Harry laughed.

"Fifteen-inch essay, two translations, and a book read by Wednesday." Neville recited. "Of course, I'm sure Alan will do fine as he's fabulous at Ancient Runes, but Hermione and I will be a tad challenged and Blaise was muttering foul deprecations upon the teacher as he did some work during class."

"I was not." Blaise retorted lightly. "How dare you imply such rudeness."

"Please, Blaise. I was sitting next to you for crying out loud." Neville grinned. "You can't hide from me."

Blaise sniffed delicately, and waved down Theodore. Theodore, however, only gave Blaise a careful nod, flicking his eyes to Pansy before walking over and delicately starting a conversation. Blaise watched with tight eyes, and glanced to Alan whose expression was almost a mirror. Harry leaned against the wall beside him.

“What’s with him?”

“Paternal pressure.” Alan answered lightly. “He’s not giving in – he’s assured me of that – but he does intend to sow discontent and lies. If anything goes too far, he’s matured to have the charity of a vulture and is more than ready and willing to do him in.” Alan smirked tightly. “He’ll probably get away with it too.” Alan caught a glimpse of Harry’s careful expression and snorted. “He’s got reason, Harry. His father lost his filial piety long ago, and taught him well how to freeze his blood.”

Harry laughed shortly. “Such delightful friends you have, Alan.”

Any further discussion was cut off - Snape opened the door and glared the students inside. Harry followed Alan with a faint smile and sat next to him – several of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were startled by the choice, more so when Neville settled next to Blaise. Hermione waved to Harry before settling by Anthony and several other Ravenclaws while Susan hailed Ron to sit with her and Kevin. Harry moved to pull out his book, but Alan stopped him and shook his head at Hermione across the room. Hermione listened, and then immediately turned to say something to Anthony that made him scowl. Harry was quite curious, but set it aside. As much leeway as Alan got, which extended to Harry, Severus remained a stern taskmaster. Thus, Harry remained quiet, glancing around the room. Seeing the décor, however, sparked a short comment to Alan.

“Quite fond of the dark ambience, isn’t he?” Harry laughed, mostly to dispel his own unease at the darkness in the room. Alan frowned, and glanced up at Severus with a dark frown. Severus ignored it for the time being, but he gave a discrete motion – the curtain nearest them split ever so slightly to allow a sliver more light in. The hint in and of itself dispelled Harry’s unease and he sighed in relief. He purposefully ignored the pictures, however. He didn’t need to set himself off.

"I have not asked you to take out your books." Severus snapped, closing the door behind the last student and stalking to his desk to stare out across the classroom. "I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention."

Harry straightened curiously, watching Severus in exclusion of the gloom of the classroom. He met Severus' eyes with curiosity as he scanned the classroom, but Severus did not acknowledge it.

"You have had five teachers so far in this subject so far, I believe."

Thank you Captain Obvious, Harry immediately thought. He blanked his expression so as not to give his mirth away. Alan stepped on his foot; apparently he hadn't moved fast enough to escape his notice.

"Naturally these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an OWL in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the NEWT work, which will be much more advanced."

This announcement immediately got Neville's attention, and he followed Snape with his eyes as the teacher began to prowl the edges of the room. Harry could not argue his own interest either.

"The Dark Arts," Severus practically purred the words "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."

Harry found himself almost entranced by the caress Severus spoke with. He was even more surprised to find himself partially agreeing with him. He had found several Dark spells in his own explorations, and, while they frightened him, the power and promise were indeed entrancing. Harry wondered how powerful a draw Neville felt towards them with his sheer lust for knowledge. Was this why he'd learned Fiendfyre? Harry shook himself as Severus returned to a normal tone of voice, returning to paying more attention.

"Your defences must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. These pictures," Severus raised an arm their way and Harry completely ignored them, closing his eyes as he got the twinge of desire to look up, "give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse," Oh, Harry knew that one too well, "feel the Dementor's kiss," He didn't want to know, "or provoke the aggression of the Inferius." Harry snorted. He hadn't thought they had to be provoked.

"Has an Inferius been seen, then?" Parvati asked, fear pitching her voice into shrill territory. "Is it definite, is he using them?"

"The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," Severus answered dismissively, "which means you should be well-advised to assume he might use them again. No ..." Severus resumed his pacing, back to his desk, "... you are, I believe, nearly novices in the use of nonverbal spells." Harry glanced at Alan. Oh. He'd taught himself that during third and fourth year, when Neville had abruptly decided to do so after inquiring to their parents. This was potentially going to be easy. "What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

Several hands shot into the air, most of them obvious – they were all in Alan's coterie. After a moment's consideration, Severus pointed to Daphne.

"There's no warning about what spell you're going to use." Daphne answered. "It's a small, but sometimes important advantage."

"Indeed. Five points to Slytherin." Severus purred. "Those who progress to silent spell casting and no longer have to shout incantations gain an element of surprise over their opponent. Not all wizards can do this, of course: it is a question of concentration and mind power which some ... lack." Severus scanned the class and lingered upon several faces. Harry noted with malicious interest that Parvati quailed under his gaze even as she stubbornly stared back. "You will divide into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."

The best that could be said was that the students knew the basics of jinxes and all could cast a plain shield. Geoffrey's teaching had managed to stick with them quite well. However, despite noting Neville's ability to cast silent spells, he hadn't gone over them, leaving it for sixth year. Several students attempted to cheat, whispering spells under their breath. Several of Alan's coterie had introduced the concept to the younger students, so while Harry, Neville, and Alan already had the skill in hand, Blaise, Theodore, Hermione, and the others were not far behind. Daphne and Susan somehow managed to find and pair with each other, taking to the assignment with glee. Harry and Alan were effectively playing ping-pong with a spell, completely silently. Severus didn't remark upon it once, until partway through when Anthony cursed up a storm at Hermione for hexing him. Hermione wasn't at all sympathetic in return. Severus stalked over and addressed him quite firmly.

"Mr. Goldstein, if you cannot manage a simple shield spell you should not be taking it out on someone else."

Anthony muttered something with a frown, and Severus stalked back to the front of the room. "Perhaps we need a demonstration. Mr. Potter, if you would?"

Harry blinked, but easily strode to the front of the classroom, turning to face Severus without any concern. He was confident he could shield against him easily, and completely silently. Severus gave him no warning before he shot a hex at him silently. Equally silent, Harry cast a high-level shield and was grateful for it when the spell blasted into it with enough force to have collapsed the lesser shield most would have used. Harry didn't indicate the effort involved at all beyond a faint waver as he lost his balance. Severus smiled down at him and dismissed him to his seat, starting in on a further lecture on the subject, one Harry effectively ignored – he already understood the principles required.

Break was something Harry worked on his homework during, encouraging Ron in his efforts and putting his own thoughts together. Ron was left heading for the library while the rest of them – most of those present for Defence class, certainly – went to find the way to Arithmancy.

Harry's head was spinning faintly after that class, and he quickly finished a short lunch before retreating for the rest of the free time to attack his Arithmancy work with the help of Hermione and Neville. They found Ron there, who merely shook his head at their ideas, something Harry couldn't quite argue with. He was more confident about Snape's homework than he was about Arithmancy, and that was mildly frightening. He almost finished the work when it was time to leave for Care of Magical Creatures with Ron, who gladly followed him out of the school to Hagrid's hut – they were the only students to do so. Hagrid greeted them as though he'd expected no more, despite the presence of several gnarly creatures. Harry was mildly grateful Hagrid wasn't a demanding teacher – his head was still in the clouds from Arithmancy, and he was so tense he felt nigh unto snapping. Surprisingly, the lesson calmed him down with so few people present – otherwise defined as himself, Ron, and Hagrid - as the animals were friendly and caused no problems.

He felt only mildly ashamed he couldn't remember what they were when he re-entered the castle, blissfully free of homework. Ron was ecstatic about it, remaining cheerful all the way down to the dungeons, where they rejoined the rest of their friends at the door to the classroom. Harry had to fight down a chill of foreboding – a dark stone room underground was very likely this was to spur a reaction from him, and no amount of cautious looks and reassurances from his friends inspired any confidence. He only hoped Green's presence would offset the challenge...

The door was pushed quickly open and Green waved them all in, looking mildly disgruntled about something. Harry waited until last and felt a small smile twitch onto his face – apparently Slughorn was additionally attending this lesson, which was probably why Green was so put out.

Inside, the room had been rearranged completely. Instead of several long tables, there were fourteen desks exactly, arranged around the walls in a horseshoe shape. Alan happily took the desk directly across from the teacher's. Harry grinned as Blaise chose the desk directly to his right; Harry took the one to Alan's left, which effectively led the rest of their friends to gather around – Daphne was behind

Alan, Theodore behind Blaise, and Ron behind Harry. It placed him right next to Hermione. Neville was to Harry's left and studiously ignoring Anthony when he took the last seat on that side, next to Hermione and behind Ernie Macmillan. Draco and the rest of the Ravenclaws were on the right side of the classroom, Draco sitting beside Theodore. The two were completely ignoring each other.

With everyone inside, Green pulled the door shut and nodded to Slughorn, who had waited at the front of the room as the students seated themselves. There were three tripods set up for the interest of the class. The one directly in front of Alan was shiny white, with steam rising in spirals and smelling of polished wood, a spring breeze and some strange kind of potpourri Harry couldn't identify. Alan was eyeing it with an odd little smile. In front of Neville was a mud-like dark sludge – across the room in front of Kevin was what looked like boiling water. Harry knew that one immediately – it was Veritaserum. Lily had made that several times both out of curiosity and for Dumbledore. Slughorn chuckled cheerily and quickly greeted them all. As he moved to do so, Green abruptly snapped,

"Get your stuff out. Scales, kits, and books. Do you all have everything you need?"

Harry had already gotten his stuff out, mimicking Alan and trusting him to know what Green would expect. Hermione quickly and efficiently caught up, and Anthony and Draco both looked a little pinched. Slughorn clucked his tongue.

"Now then, Master Quintelyuv –"

"Green. Call me Green. If you must, call me Professor Green. Master Quintelyuv makes me think Louis is somewhere around here and you don't need me twitchy."

Slughorn gave him a curious look. Harry stifled his laughter into soft snickers as he remembered the one time he'd met Green's necromancer brother. As far as he could tell, the two did not get along even if they helped each other out. Slughorn finally shrugged and turned back to addressing the class, leaving Green to look over the

desk and glare at the small cauldron of leaping gold Harry couldn't begin to guess at.

"Well then, I'm sure you all understand that Professor Green will be typically teaching you but on occasion I feel I should drop in to see how you are doing – just as he is welcome to drop in to any of my classes." Green blinked and shook himself before going back to glancing over the papers. "Now then, attendance. Green, did you find it – Ah, thank you very much."

Green just smirked and turned back to the desk. Slughorn glanced down the paper and simply called roll. He glanced up and beamed at Harry, Neville, and Blaise and gave Alan a searching look. Once he finished, he smiled back at the class and grandly indicated the cauldron in front of Kevin. "I have prepared several potions for you to look over simply to see what they are like. These are all potions you ought to be able to prepare once you have passed your NEWTs. Can anyone tell me what this one is?"

Harry raised his hand just after Hermione and before Alan. Neville added his own after a moment. Slughorn smiled as he selected Hermione.

"Veritaserum." Hermione succinctly answered. "It's a colourless, odourless, potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth."

"Very good, very good!" Slughorn positively beamed. "Now," He turned to indicate the sludge in front of Neville, "this one here is fairly well known, and has been featured in a few Ministry leaflets lately. Can anyone..." Hermione's hand was already back in the air, as was Neville's. Harry was sure he knew it, but couldn't think of it at the moment. Alan simply looked amused. Slughorn once again called on Hermione, apparently quite interested in her vigour.

"Polyjuice Potion, sir."

"Excellent, excellent." Slughorn nodded happily, "Now this one here ... yes, my dear?"

Hermione had returned her hand to the air when he'd merely looked at the other potion. Neville hadn't even bothered to raise his own, instead smiling bitterly as he traced his finger across the cover of his book. Hermione eagerly answered, glancing momentarily at Neville in front of her and then vindictively at Anthony beside her. "It's Amortentia."

"It is indeed." Slughorn agreed. "It seems almost foolish to ask, but I assume you know what it does?"

"It's the most powerful love potion in the world." Hermione quickly answered. "It's got the distinct mother-of-pearl sheen, and the steam is rising in spirals. It's supposed to smell different for everyone." She pinked slightly.

Slughorn looked absolutely enthralled. "May I get your name again, my dear?"

"Hermione Granger, sir."

"Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, founder of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?"

"No, I don't think so sir. I'm muggle-born, you see."

"And she's like that for all her classes." Neville muttered loud enough to hear. It wasn't quiet enough to disguise his admiring tone – and it certainly didn't hide it from Anthony, who flushed slightly in offence.

Slughorn immediately beamed. "Oho, is she a friend of yours, Neville? And, you as well, Harry? Your mother was a muggle-born with quite the same talent! Positively astonishing skills." Hermione quickly blushed, even as Harry shrugged awkwardly. "Well Ms. Granger, take twenty well-earned points to Gryffindor."

Draco made a faint disgusted sound, but Slughorn just continued over him.

"Amortentia doesn't create love of course. It is impossible to create, manufacture, or imitate love, but it does engender a most powerful

infatuation or obsession. It is probably the most dangerous or powerful potion in this room – oh yes,” Slughorn shook his finger at Draco and Theodore, both of whom were looking sceptical. “When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love … now, it is time for us to start work.”

“Sir, you haven’t mentioned the potion on your desk.” Alan pointed out cautiously. Harry glanced back over at it to find Green was still glaring irritably at the happily splashing potion. Slughorn was grinning.

“Oho. Yes, that. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis.” Harry stared, startled, and heard Alan give a sharp gasp. It was echoed on his other side – he could only assume Neville and Hermione knew it as well. “I take it, several of you know what this little potion does? Miss Granger?” He asked.

“It’s liquid luck! It makes you lucky!”

The whole class straightened to attention.

“Quite right, take another ten points to Gryffindor. Yes, it’s a funny little potion, Felix Felicis. Desperately tricky to make,” Green grunted affirmatively, still staring at it as though it would tell him its secrets if he could just glare it into submission, “and disastrous to get wrong.” Harry suspected Green knew that well. “However if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavours tend to succeed … at least until the potion wears off.”

“Why don’t people drink it all the time, sir?” Terry eagerly asked.

Green answered sharply, “Because it’s toxic in large quantities, expensive and difficult as Hell, and leads to dangerous recklessness and overconfidence.” He made a disgusted sound. “You will be telling me how you managed this, Horace.”

“Certainly.” Slughorn happily agreed. Apparently Green’s surliness had no effect on him. “Yes, Felix is quite dangerous if taken too often. It is a potion to be used sparingly, with utmost care…”

"Have you taken it, sir?" Alan asked, curious.

"Twice in my life." Slughorn answered, "Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoons with breakfast. Two perfect days." Slughorn stared dreamily into space for several minutes and then came back down with a grin. "And that, is what I will be offering as a prize this lesson."

Green grunted indignantly and frowned at the papers he was looking over, but Harry, along with everyone else was dead silent. What would he do with that? Harry honestly couldn't imagine, although it was very likely quite effective.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis." Slughorn continued, taking a small corked glass phial from his pocket, showing it to them all. "Enough for twelve hours luck. From dawn to dusk, you will be lucky in all that you attempt.

"Now, I must warn you, Felix Felicis is banned in all organized competitions ... sporting events, for instance, examinations, and elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only ... and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

"So." Slughorn briskly pocketed the phial again and smiled out across them all. "How are you to win this fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion-making. We have little over an hour left, which should be more than enough time for you to make a decent effort at Draught of Living Death. It is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. However, the person who does the best will win little Felix here. Off you go."

The room fell into a fervent silence. Around him, everyone pulled their cauldrons closer, moved weights onto their scales and began work. Harry felt the thrum of energy rising above them in the classroom but none of it really affected him. He was interested, certainly, but ... unless he kept that on him close enough to bring into play during a fight for his life, he couldn't imagine a use for it. He could have used it over the summer, certainly, but that was the past. Maybe, if he won it, he could give it to Nanna, to keep her and his mother safe...

Malfoy was flipping pages and sorting ingredients fervently, desperately. He was clearly eager to win the prize, and so, apparently were Neville and Theodore. Alan didn't look half as interested, but upon seeing Draco's interest, he bent quickly over his work. Harry shrugged and did the same. Several minutes later, while he was carefully cutting his valerian roots, Harry saw something faint drop onto his desk. Harry quickly glanced it over and unrolled it, breaking the disillusionment. It was a list of alternate instructions, three copies of it. Harry glanced up at Alan, but he was ignoring Harry in order to work on his own potion. Harry shrugged, kept one page and, ignoring his own work for the moment, slid Hermione's copy onto her desk under her book cover. She noticed it and frowned at Harry before turning back to her work and ignoring it. Harry waited several minutes, and repeated it with Neville, who was far more interested in the paper than Hermione had been. Harry shrugged and surreptitiously copied the page once more, crumpling it and dropping it to the ground, kicking it carefully back to Ron and then glancing at him and then down. Ron quickly found the page and picked it up, looking the instructions over and groaning, quickly making note of them. Harry just smiled, referencing the paper as he moved on.

He didn't get far before Alan abruptly swore; Green surged out of his seat, a spell off before he'd even straightened. Alan fell out of his chair, and Harry moved towards him before Green barked, "Leave him to me!" and he backed off. Alan's potion was vanished and as things calmed down Harry finally could see what had happened. Alan's cauldron was overturned, the flames beneath out, the potion gone. The only potion on him, however, was on his hands, which Green quickly looked over and pulled a phial out of a pocket on his robes. He hauled Alan to his feet, pulled his hands back over his desk and simply poured the concoction over them. It splashed on the counter, but didn't leave the confines – it stopped against a barrier around the edge of the table.

"Get back to your potions." Green snapped. "We don't need them exploding from neglect – the mess is in hand." Green lowered his voice, but not enough to keep Harry from hearing. "What in the bloody blue blazes happened Alan? And you're not wearing your fucking gloves!"

"My cauldron just dumped itself over." Alan snapped, keeping his own voice down. "I know I didn't spill it; you know me better than that. God, that stings. Why would I need gloves for something I know perfectly?"

"Is it feeling better than the burn?" Green asked absently, flicking an annoyed glance at Alan. The phial must have had some sort of expansion – potion was still pouring out, less rampantly than before but still coming. Green would occasionally make the poured potion vanish before it overwhelmed the spell. "Harry, get back to your potion. You've already compromised it. Alan, go up to Madam Pomfrey now. Keep your hands off anything. If you're so distracted, Harry, go with him to open the doors. I'm sure you can hex any stragglers who get too close to you right now; it's in the middle of class. So long as Horace doesn't mind."

Slughorn shook his head. "Certainly not, Green. By all means boys, go up to Pomfrey. If nobody else is having any problems, we'll continue the lesson. The prize will be delayed; however, there will be points awarded for the best potion. Keep up the good work."

"Neville?" Harry called. Neville nodded quickly.

"Yeah, I'll get your stuff. Blaise has Alan's – get a move on, already."

Harry smiled. Neville hadn't even looked up from his potion once he'd established that Green had the problem in hand and it wasn't spreading. Harry opened the door and moved into a brisk walk up the hallway, Alan following behind him, glaring at his hands.

"You alright?" Harry asked.

"I just got boiling potion dumped all over my hands." Alan drawled. "What do you think?"

"You don't spill your cauldron." Harry scoffed. "Who did it?"

"Not a clue. Not a damn clue. We need to move. The longer we wait, the harder this will be to heal and the more the pain will return."

Harry nodded and jogged slightly as they moved up the winding stairs to find Madam Pomfrey. "What was that – that Green used on your hands?" Harry panted out.

"Just a basic cooling draught." Alan answered, swearing momentarily as he panted and swayed – without the use of his hands, he had less balance and was clearly frustrated by it. "It's non-reactive to most potions. Nothing in the Draught of Living Death would react to it. It helps to dilute it as well, whatever's on here, so it won't have as much effect."

"Why would it have an effect?" Harry asked carefully, opening another door to make the trip shorter by use of a secret passage.

"It's effectively in my bloodstream, or absorbed through the damaged skin." Alan frowned. "Otherwise I'd have fainted and probably been extremely hard to wake, or something worse because the potion's only half finished."

"Oh." Harry frowned and walked beside Alan to the doors of Pomfrey's realm "Is that well-known?"

"To most who know potions, it's known quite well." Alan growled out.

Harry opened the door and Pomfrey descended upon Alan immediately. Harry frowned as he waited aside – if that had been known, somebody wanted Alan hurt and hurt badly. If Green hadn't had the tables warded, the potion would have gone straight down Alan's chest and legs – massive burns, and a large chance of the potion taking effect, putting him in a coma. That was dangerous. And it had been purposeful too. Worse, would they try again?

A/N: Guess what? They're at Hogwarts. School's started. Isn't rivalry fun? And Guess what? Well, I suppose you'll just have to see, won't you, although I do not believe it will be hard...
Next chapter, Quidditch tryouts! Problems, solutions, resolutions, a bit of extraneous information, and... well. You'll see. See you Thursday!

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-four

Madam Pomfrey was quite capable, and Alan was healed in time to rejoin the next morning's classes, which was good because the workload they were under was insane. Ron may have been struggling with his classes, but Harry had two more classes than he did and, thus, less time to work and study. The only reason Harry had not immediately dropped a class or two was because in all of his classes he was with his friends. Hermione became his new best friend – Alan and Neville both had the disgusting habit of remembering things with minimal studying and the self-confidence to deal with less than stellar grades when they did the homework without revising it even once after it was done. Harry stubbornly insisted on going over his work, something only Hermione made a point of doing. Besides that, it was hilarious to see Anthony stubbornly remaining with her even when she showed him up time and time again.

As it stood, Harry barely remembered to write his parents by the time Saturday rolled around. He scratched out the letter and then added as a postscript when he'd initially forgotten, 'Dad, who are the Hodges? Connor's made a good friend of one, and I'm curious, because Fred and George have run into them too.'

The return letter come Wednesday was more than worth it. Surprisingly, Sirius answered it in a second letter, aside from his normal letter from Lily. The why made him laugh.

Dear Harry,

I must congratulate you on sending your father into a fit. Not a single other topic could have had him swearing harder. Similarly, the Hodges are one of my most frustrating topics, but I can find it in me to laugh it up – can't do much else about them.

The Hodges are one of the old pureblood families – they're as cold-blooded and cruel as any Black, but unlike the Blacks they're supremely unconcerned about their bloodlines as anything more or less than an assurance of magical power. I don't know if you ever heard this, but rumours are plenty about the Alfaerus being something like the mafia – criminals on the Black Market. The

Hodges are the rivals of the Alfaerus, but they tend to keep it clean – i.e. between themselves.

In regards to us, this means that they are the most frustrating people to run into in the middle of a crime. If the Hodges have a hand in it, it's almost guaranteed you won't make an arrest. If they did it, they'll get away with it. If they interfered, you'll be picking up a dead body. As far as I've heard, they tend to step in only when someone crosses them. It means that as frustrated as we might get, there isn't a lot of incentive to make a fuss and many people - including me, I must say, but not your father - don't want to risk their anger. They keep their dirty business under the radar, and if it pokes above they manage to get it brushed under the rug. James and I suspect they have people in the Ministry - rather like everyone else, you know.

As to who they are, the records are easy to find – it's in the basic genealogies, from the sixteen hundreds on, at least. The current Head of the family is Howard Hodges, the second child of Benjamin Hodges who died in 1960. He has a younger brother, and an older sister, Barbara. She's divorced, so her children have returned to the family. Her youngest is Jonas Hodges, who graduated Hogwarts last year. He was a Ravenclaw. The girl Connor's made friends with would be Sable Hodges, the daughter of Barbara's oldest son, Erasmus – she's the only Hodges set to start school this year. Howard's heir, Devlin, would've been in school with Bill Weasley, but I'm pretty sure he was Slytherin. The family is about thirty or so people, not counting the rumours of 'strays' they tend to pick up.

As for my current opinion of them, I think they're all right – better than the Malfoys, at least. I've seen evidence that they have a sense of humour, and they tend to be honourable. Nobody I've known who are rumoured to be their 'kill' has really be someone I'd miss. They've kept from inciting the Aurors to come down on them and they're good-natured and prompt about being raided and fined for questionable items. I can certainly respect that.

Just keep your eyes and ears peeled, and don't owe them anything and you'll probably do pretty well. Who knows, you might even find it fun.

Good luck, kiddo, and I hope you don't die too badly under the workload you signed up for. What were you thinking, taking seven NEWT classes? Absolutely barmy. I'll let your dad read over this when he wakes up and add anything he finds necessary.

Love you, pup!

Padfoot

Sirius about summarized them right, and I pretty much agree with him on their stance. Please warn Connor to be careful, and I'll probably go ask Fred and George about theirs. Just because I respect them doesn't mean I approve of dealing with them. However, I won't tell you not to – you're old enough to make your own decisions. Just be cautious.

How is Alan?

Love,

Prongs

Once he got over the shock of his father asking after Alan, he found it was surprisingly informative. He was also surprised that he had known or guessed most of it already, and he knew a bit more than his parents did – he knew about the Bakers. Either they hadn't bothered to mention that's who the men likely were or they just didn't know, at least not well enough to mention it.

They also didn't warn him of anything he didn't already know, but he appreciated it all the same. Watching Connor had been remarkably easy – he was often found in the library, sitting with Sable Hodges, Tyler Redgrave and Grant Pupp. Recently, Faith Growman and Catrin Vance had started joining them as well. Sable was the clear leader, but Harry trusted Melanie to keep an eye on Connor and keep him out of trouble. He had enough work to be going on with – Sirius was right to call him barmy for taking so many classes.

Either way very little outside of schoolwork was happening and Alan hadn't run into trouble again. Green was keeping a watchful eye on

the class, Slughorn hadn't visited, and Harry was more grateful than ever that he was close friends with overachievers. Ron was the only one with any difficulty using silent spells, and with several people willing to work with him on the usage he was catching on fairly quickly.

Hermione had also broached Alan about the notes he'd passed to them, and he explained that they were tricks his father had taught him to improve the potions in the books. He'd produced it from memory, and wanted to share. He could name the improvements Severus recommended for every potion in the book; Hermione refused to believe him until he pointed out in the notes from years before that the instructions Severus told them to follow differed slightly from the book. Hermione used her entire next free period double-checking that, and finally agreed with Alan to try it on the next potion. When it worked, Hermione begged Alan to get Snape to write out the changes for the book; even more surprisingly, Snape agreed.

Through it all, Harry managed to struggle through and survive the first two weeks before he was finally pulled into working out the Quidditch tryouts, something he wasn't entirely looking forward to. After breakfast and down at the pitch, the group looking for positions was quite large and ranged through all the years. At the very least, they all looked interested in Quidditch. He was also surprised to see Neville standing off the one side, leaning with Alan against the Quidditch stands. Harry sent them a careful smile. He knew why they were there. He was still at risk of a bad reaction from the curse, and if they hadn't been there, he probably would have asked for them to show up. He needed insurance.

"Hey."

Harry turned quickly and looked up at the wide boy from Slughorn's compartment. Harry couldn't remember his name, but stuck out his hand to give him a quick handshake, one that left his hand tingling more from the boy's firm grip than any outside influence.

"Cormac McLaggen, Keeper. We met in old Sluggy's compartment on the train."

Harry nodded. "Nice to meet you. You didn't try out last year." He'd have remembered him if he'd had.

"I was in the hospital wing. Swallowed a pound of doxy eggs for a bet." He grinned proudly. Harry smiled meaninglessly back. He was something like Sirius, then, and mildly unreliable.

"Okay. Wait over there, please?" Harry pointed to the stands. "We're running Chaser trials first."

McLaggen stiffened slightly before leaving. Harry didn't give it much thought, although he did note that if McLaggen even did just as good as Ron, he was going to be reserve and reserve only. He didn't trust him.

Harry glanced over the applicants and told them to fly around the pitch twice. Harry was quickly pleased most of the team was still intact – several people were ruled out immediately for their bad performance on their brooms, and that thinned the group to a much more manageable one. He had them running the pitch to the reserve Beaters from last year, shooting on Ron, while he flew around the edges, typically shadowed by Alan. He was grateful for it, when, while Melanie was shooting once more and making quick passes between herself and Demelza Robbins - a promising reserve - he suddenly blacked out, his body writhing in agony. He couldn't see straight again until he had something solid under his feet, and he sat down, putting his head between his knees for several long moments until his vision cleared and his body relaxed, the pain fading away.

When he could finally see, Hermione was sitting nearby, Alan crouched in front of him and McLaggen asking loudly what was going on. Harry's first reaction was to curtly and rudely tell McLaggen where he could shove it. Alan eased the sharp words with a quick, concise explanation of his condition. Harry, personally, was cursing himself and his bad luck until Alan finally got his attention again.

"Are you going to be alright?"

Harry finally sat up, waiting for his head to finish spinning and growled out, "I should be fine, but I can't get on a broom again. Not today." His hands were shaking at the mere thought of it.

"Use Sonorus." Alan curtly answered. "I'll be your hands in the air. You can see fine from here, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I trust you to be honest."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Alan asked, teasingly.

"You're a Slytherin." McLaggen growled. "You'd rather your team win."

"After I was kicked out?" Alan asked, his eyebrow raised. "I owe them a bit of retribution. Helping my friend with the Gryffindor tryouts is perfectly fine for me."

"How'd you even make captain if you can't fly?"

"McLaggen, shut your mouth or leave." Harry snapped, standing up. He didn't care that McLaggen was nearly seven inches taller than him, the same height as Alan, and broader than Alan would ever be. "I'm the captain; I'll be back in the air by the time the first game rolls around, and it's none of your freaking business anyways. You're not even on the team yet. If you don't want to ruin your chances of getting there, you might want to shut up while you're ahead."

Harry then brusquely turned his back on him and cast sonorous on himself. "Alright, back to your places. Let's run that pass by again, and then move on."

Melanie and Ginny quickly whipped the hopefuls back into place, and within the hour the Chaser tryouts were done, and they'd started on the Beaters, looking for a reserve or replacement if they were better. Ritchie Coote almost made it – he gladly took the position of reserve to Nanna and Jimmy Peakes, leaving the pitch much as Katie Bell, Melanie and Ginny had with Demelza Robbins and Dean Thomas as reserve chasers.

Keeper tryouts came up next and Harry had to consciously unclench his jaw when Cormac McLaggen saved all five penalty shots against him. Ron, thank Merlin, managed the same. Harry sighed deeply and moved to descend out of the stands when he found himself nearly running face-first into McLaggen's chest. Harry quickly back-pedalled and nearly fell over; McLaggan reached to catch him and Harry let himself fall, catching himself painfully on his arms and glaring up at the burly seventh year, completely ignoring his angry expression.

"For crying out loud, McLaggen, you ham-handed son-of-a-plimpy, get out of my fucking way and back off!"

"I saved the same goals as Weasley; why is he still Keeper?" He growled.

"Because he's my friend and isn't acting like some rotten brute and gets along with the rest of the team." Harry snapped back, abruptly brushing himself off and standing up. "And he can remember from one minute to the next that I'm currently a hands off zone. You're reserve; you can practice with the team, and if something happens to him you'll be in, but for Merlin's sake clean up your attitude." Harry stalked forward and got into his space again, glaring at him. "The only reason I haven't told you to bugger off and practice on your own is because right now my temper's out of whack and I don't quite trust my judgement. You have a chance to convince me you're worth keeping on the team, and right now you're doing your chances no favours. I need to get inside and eat, so get Out. Of. My. Way."

McLaggen trembled, furious, but he moved and Harry stalked past him, his anger barely held in check. Normally he'd fly to wear off the worry, but since that was currently the problem he was left steaming with no recourse. He nearly cried with relief when Neville was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He quite happily followed him to a tree nearby – everyone had decided to work outside today on their homework, and the fresh air and camaraderie did wonders for his bad mood. He was feeling a lot better and, honestly, quite pleased with himself over the success of tryouts by the time they went inside to dinner.

It didn't last.

"Harry, m'boy, just the lad I've been waiting for!" Slughorn hijacked them almost as soon as they were through the door. Neville immediately rolled his eyes; they'd been moving to sit at the Slytherin table, as they were wont to do since last year. Harry fought down the urgent need to hex the overbearing man, and just smiled with a touch of confusion. Slughorn didn't seem affected in the least.

"I was just looking for you and your friends! We're having a supper tonight in my quarters, just the lovely rising stars I've found, simply brilliant. McLaggen is coming, and Melinda Bobbin – do you know her? Her family owns a large chain of Apothecaries – and I was also hoping to be joined by your dear friend Neville and Blaise, and of course, lovely Miss Granger has an invite. Alan Prince, as well ... why, you've such a wonderful group, why don't you all come?" Slughorn glanced between them all and just smiled brilliantly. Harry fought down the desire to deck the man, and let his tongue loose.

"Sir, I'm just about ready to reattach someone's ears to their rearend, and their nads to their earlobes. I really should just eat dinner and return to my room. It's all this stress; it's getting to me. Really. Please excuse me." Harry smiled like his teeth hurt and stalked around him, returning to the table and putting his head down on his arms.

The rest of the group simply split around Slughorn and joined him. He almost didn't notice – his arms were starting to tremble, and Harry remembered the last few weeks with dread. He'd somehow, he didn't know how, managed to keep it all together but he was still ready to fall apart. His nightmares had gotten worse – he'd gone to Pomfrey three times in the past two weeks, four half-doses each time, and he had been denied them over the weekend until Wednesday. She wouldn't even give him a calming draught...

"Harry, you alright?"

Alan's voice cut off a sibilant murmur he'd been hearing, and Harry quickly lifted his head, glancing worriedly around the room. Alan aborted an attempt to put his hand on his shoulder, and Harry worriedly asked, "What was that murmur I heard? I was sure ..."

"Harry, calm down. You're probably hearing things again."

Harry grimaced; while he hadn't fallen into a full out flashback, he'd heard things – memories, screams, shouts – parts of memories not visited in full but real enough to make him think they were. He was managing, he swore, he just... Food was not appealing at all, but he needed to eat or Pomfrey would kidnap him. Harry searched until he found a soup dish and spooned up a serving with a bit of chicken and a glass of water. He hadn't taken a bite when Alan suddenly choked and spat his meal back out. Harry whipped around to look at him, and the first thing he saw was Alan's necklace glowing white. Alan swore explosively; everyone around him dropped their meal, spat out their mouthfuls. Quickly, Neville cast a blanket spell, covering all their plates and scowled.

"Only Alan's. It's on his utensils, in his cup. You need to go to the hospital wing, Alan?"

"Yes." Alan nodded carefully. "You should go eat at the Gryffindor table, it's probably safe. Check everything..."

"We know, Alan." Blaise reassured him. "Go with Harry to the Hospital. You both need it."

Harry scowled, but followed him, not arguing. Maybe if he saw Pomfrey again he could talk her into giving him something ... anything.

They were halfway along before Alan started chuckling. Irritably, Harry groused, "What are you laughing at?"

"This is just reminding me of our first Potions lesson together. I managed to send you, me and Neville all to the Hospital wing, remember?"

"And the rest of the class." Harry added, smiling faintly. "Sabotaged your own potion."

"You were bugging me."

“Glad to know the effort paid off.”

Both of them were laughing by the time they arrived at the hospital wing. Pomfrey was less than happy to see them, and pushed Alan down on a bed immediately to look him over, muttering threats under her breath the whole time. She handed him several potions, and then glanced over at Harry, who merely met her eyes with a blank, tired look. She sighed.

“How are you holding up, Harry?”

“I’m alright. Stressed. Pissed off. Wishing I could fly.” Harry shrugged.

“You have at least a month, maybe more before it should be worn off, Harry. There is nothing I can do for that. How are you sleeping?”

“Terribly.”

“You can’t take more dreamless sleep for at least four days. It’d be better if it were a week – if this keeps up, I’d advise you to drop a class, maybe even two.”

He put his head in his hands. “I don’t want to drop a class. What could I drop?”

“Care.” Alan offered quietly. “Or Herbology. Neither of them are a requirement.”

“Hagrid wouldn’t like it.” Harry pointed out. “And I like that class. Herbology is useful for the vindictive horticulture some people might have, and I think I need it anyways for Mediwizard. And it would leave Ron alone to drop Care. He only took it because I was. It’s not like that’s stressing me; I could talk Hagrid into giving me all kinds of leeway. I haven’t really paid attention even once this past two weeks. All I remember is helping him feed some of the hippogriffs this week...”

Poppy huffed. “Alright, fine. Would you like to take a nap in here, or leave for elsewhere? Alan, you should be fine but check in with your father if anything feels out of place. Harry ... just, good luck.”

Harry grimaced and nodded, walking out with Alan with a scowl on his face. Alan shot him a cautious look and Harry growled,

"You know you're in deep shit when all the healer can say is 'good luck'"

Alan could only shrug. Harry didn't expect much more from him, and, after several minutes of wandering back downstairs – he was thinking of the kitchen, because he did need to eat and so did Alan – Harry finally made a point to speak up and ask,

"That's twice, Alan."

"Yes." Alan answered curtly. "I've avoided one other attempt." Harry didn't feel the need for elaboration.

"To the kitchens, then?"

Alan merely nodded, and Harry just left it at that.

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Sunday was miserable. Monday was worse. Harry tried to sleep in, really, but he didn't manage it. After tossing and turning from three in the morning till six, Harry finally pulled himself out of bed, grabbed his bookbag and retreated the library until it was halfway through the first class of the day. After that, he moved to the breakfast table and didn't even have the heart to check his meal for poison as he should have after Alan's encounter, eating a pittance and looking over his work again until he just shoved it back in his bag and laid his head on his arms once more. Ron, sitting further up the table and frantically looking over his own work, finally came down to him and frowned.

"Mate, are you alright?"

"Fuck off, Ron." Harry ground out. Admirably, Ron ignored him.

"We'll be needing to go to Defence in a few minutes. Do you want me to take a look at your work?"

"If I pull that paper back out, I'll tear it into tiny pieces and burn them."

"Okay, don't touch it then." Ron returned. Harry growled something else vulgar and cruel under his breath and when Ron didn't react at all, Harry made a note that he needed to buy Ron something spiffy and shiny for Christmas ... or his birthday. Like, maybe a Firebolt. He was a saint to be putting up with this.

Ron remained silently across from him until he deemed it time to make their way to the Defence classroom. Harry followed sullenly, and prayed Severus wouldn't make him do anything. He was no more polite to the rest of the group even during class, which fortunately covered a spell and practice Harry already knew quite well, which meant he could just sit there and brood. After, while Ron went to the library to finish the essay, Alan chivvied Harry along dauntlessly, sending him up a secret passageway before him and following with determined cheerfulness. Neville, Blaise and Hermione were ahead of them.

As they came out, Harry stalked to catch up with Neville – and froze when Alan swore, and then screamed. Then he just tumbled down the stairs. Harry didn't even take time to think – he ran back to the stairs and half-ran, half-fell down himself racing for the bottom, hoping ... The staircase has circumvented two floors, and the bottom end was sealed behind them – and the flight was steep, narrow, without any handrail. A hard thump told him Alan had hit the end, and Harry barely caught himself before he fell onto him. He knelt, but didn't open the door, lighting his wand quickly and quickly looking Alan over. He had blood on his face, and his nose had been broken. Neville came down behind him and swore expansively.

"Harry, is he all right?"

"I don't know; he must have knocked himself silly."

"Hold onto him, and let me open the door. The Hospital Wing isn't far."

Harry quickly grabbed Alan's shoulders and Neville pushed the portrait open, hopping over Alan's crumpled form and into the space. The bright light made Alan flinch away immediately, but he didn't speak beyond a pained groan. Blaise crouched behind Harry, prompting him to swear when he finally noticed, but his help was welcome – it would have been difficult to carry Alan with Neville for him, due to the height disparity - Neville knew, but wasn't confident in, his mobilicorpus. Instead, Harry ran ahead to alert Pomfrey while Neville and Blaise braced Alan between them. Pomfrey was less than pleased with Alan's return visit, even as she clucked over him and sent Harry running again to find Professor Snape. She scolded Neville and Blaise and made them return to class. Harry wondered if it was that obvious he couldn't concentrate – she didn't even try to send him out. Either way, he was more than grateful to simply wait around the Hospital wing and impatiently await Pomfrey's answer. Finally, she came out and huffed.

"Three times in one month; the boy is mad. It's barely the third week, only two days after the last ..." She glanced up at Harry and pouted. "Where is Professor Snape?"

"He can't leave his class right now." Harry answered curtly. "He told me to wait, hear the verdict and relay any potions requests you have that might be in his stores – he doesn't like Green's work."

Pomfrey snorted, eyeing him critically. "Very well. Alan has a concussion, a small crack in his skull, a broken nose, collarbone and wrist, and two bruised and two broken ribs. His kneecap is badly bruised, and most of the rest of him as well. He should be fine by tomorrow, but Merlin save him if he gets in another accident this month. Honestly, even Quidditch players aren't this bad. Go pass that along to Snape, as well as a request for bruise balm of some kind; I'll need a lot of it and I don't care if it's his or Professor Green's." Harry nodded and ran to do as he was told, stifling his thoughts and his worries as he wore himself out. Maybe, just maybe, exhausting himself would help where the Dreamless Sleep was no longer allowed.

He made several long trips, running errands for Severus and Pomfrey. He skipped lunch save for the food Pomfrey forced on him before

sending him to inform the Headmaster, and sent his regrets with Ron to Hagrid. Finally, Pomfrey distractedly shooed him out to attend his next class in the time before the last class let out, and Harry regretfully left Alan, walking dejectedly down to the dungeons, feeling put-upon and oppressed. He couldn't bring himself to converse with Neville; he was completely distracted, staring at Alan's empty seat. Green scolded him several times for inattention, but he was hearing them less and less ... and hearing derisive laughter more and more.

He didn't notice until his skin burned; the pain overwhelmed him, burning on his wrists, dripping down his back. He couldn't breathe; his chest ached and bled. He could taste blood in the back of his throat. Someone shook his shoulder and he fell, landing painfully on his tailbone, curling in on himself, trying to get away. Why wouldn't they leave him alone, why did they grab him? Why, why, why?

Someone slapped him; he subsided into weak crying, his legs giving way beneath him, hanging on the arm affixed around his wrist. Whoever was holding him, dragging him away, put an arm around his waist, unheeding of the burning pain it incited, uncaring for his weak protests, his struggling and weeping.

Abruptly, sunlight hit his face, and Harry turned aside, blinded and blinking away tears ... tears he'd already been crying. His throat was sore, and his body ached horribly. Someone let him go, holding his arm as he stumbled and lowering him to the stairs when his legs refused to support him, just outside Hogwarts Entrance Hall. The sun was still high in the sky, and after blinking several times, Harry glanced up and found himself looking at Green, his teacher's face impassive as he stared back. Harry flushed and drew his legs up to his chest, embarrassed at losing it in the middle of class.

"Sorry." Harry mumbled.

"Don't apologize. This has been coming for days. You haven't been sleeping well, have you?"

Harry shrugged awkwardly. "I can't take Dreamless Sleep again until Wednesday, preferably Saturday. So no, I haven't."

"And Alan managed to end up in the Hospital wing again." Green pointed out. "You're very stressed. Why did Pomfrey send you to class?"

"I already missed Arithmancy and Care." Harry pointed out. "She didn't need an errand runner that badly, and she had to worry about Alan."

"Can you take a Calming Draught?" Green asked. "You're not to come back to class, you hear me? Go to Pomfrey; tell her you need something, even if she gives you a damn back rub. I'll send Neville up with your homework after class; you can make up the Potion some other time. You're a danger to yourself and everyone else around you like this. You can miss a few classes. Can you get yourself upstairs, or no?"

"There aren't a lot of people around." Harry quietly answered. "I can make it."

"Do you have a friend who's not in class right now?"

Harry shrugged. "Susan or Hannah, maybe. They don't have Potions. Tracey doesn't either."

"Will you be able to wait out here fine while I go get one of them?"

"Probably." Harry shrugged. "What about class?"

"I trust the five prefects in attendance to be able to tell the students to keep their heads on straight. The potion isn't that volatile. Wait here."

Harry nodded slowly and drew his legs up again. Merlin, did it have to happen like that? He didn't know what it must have looked like to everyone; he just remembered slipping out of consciousness, and remembering ... he was fairly sure it was when they'd whipped him, or sometime after... He'd been so terrified of them all, so hurt ... it'd hurt so badly, and none of them had cared, some of them had liked it, others cursed him while they'd whipped him, augmenting the pain, exacerbating his bruised and bloody wrists where he'd hung from the chains...

Harry stubbornly shook his head and stared across the brilliantly green grounds. There were a few students in view, but while they might have been looking his way, none of them were approaching him. The sun hung fat and high in the sky, warming his skin and making him feel mildly sleepy even as he felt raw and pained, drying his tears. Even when a cloud drifted in the way, diluting the light to a softer, gentler light it only made it easier for Harry to look around and enjoy the green grass, the soft waves capping the lake... It shook off the memories of the dungeon, and when Susan and Hannah came out and sat beside him, giving him his distance, Harry was feeling much better. After several moments, he lay back on the stone and sighed.

"Are you waiting for me to indicate I'm ready to go inside?"

"Professor Green said you'd had a breakdown in class." Hannah pointed out. "You didn't seem distressed out here, and ... and if I remember from what Ron said, the outdoors are good for you. I didn't think we needed to drag you back inside if you were fine out here. It's not like you're missing anything, and Pomfrey will probably be grateful to see you no sooner than she has to."

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. "Thank you. I hope this isn't inconveniencing you to baby-sit me."

"Not at all." Hannah smiled. "I just wish it were a tad bit sunnier so I could catch a ray or two." Susan joined her as they both laughed and Harry drank in the sound, the soft tones and gentle humour – humour that wasn't at his expense, or bought with his blood.

He spent ten more minutes just lying on the stone in front of the doors, Susan and Hannah slipping into some incomprehensible female conversation when he didn't offer to contribute. Finally, probably more than an hour later, they went back inside. Susan and Hannah treated him more like an escort than a charge, delivering him to Madam Pomfrey and leaving with a faint and shy "Goodbye," from Susan. Harry relayed Green's orders, and Pomfrey sighed before ushering him over to a bed and handing him a Calming Draught, telling him to drink it and try to go to sleep – he'd stay there overnight, so she could

get an idea if it helped or not. Despite the draught, it was still a long time before he drifted off, even if it was still before anybody came to visit him.

Remarkably, it lasted till the next morning, which entered a day of classes Harry wasn't much more enthused about, but at least he didn't have another breakdown. He spent one more night in the hospital wing with a calming draught, and was released the next day with Alan, a pocket full of half-doses of Dreamless sleep.

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Several weeks later, there had been no further attempts against Alan and Harry was feeling marginally better. Somehow it had helped to be approached in early October – the second time he had to go off the Dreamless Sleep – by a stubborn and imperious Sable Hodges who demanded tutoring in the more advanced spells for her and her friends. Harry had subsided and agreed, at the time because he wanted a distraction from homework and his own mind, but he soon found it quite enjoyable to be teaching Sable and the other first years she'd drawn to herself, which included Grant and Faith, the younger siblings of Stephanie's friends; Tyler Redgrave who was already hers; and Connor and Catrin. Sable was as much their leader as Harry or Alan led their friends, and the first years were bright and forward. When Harry hedged on tutoring them again Sable declared that Jonas had said she could cash in his favour for it and Harry acquiesced. He could think of several worse things that favour could be used for, and, admittedly, he enjoyed tutoring them.

Come the Hogsmeade weekend October twelfth, however, a few more things were different. Sometime in the meantime – Harry must have been very out of it – Ginny had gotten into a large tiff with Blaise and demanded Theodore take her to Hogsmeade in his stead. Theodore had agreed with blatant amusement, the prevalent attitude towards the fight among the group. Very few thought the argument would last, including Blaise and Ginny, but Theodore still indulged her. Daphne had approached Harry about the trip, but Harry had merely shook his head, distracted both by homework and thinking over what he would cover with Sable and her friends next week. He'd turned down Susan the day before, citing a desire to just relax that she could

appreciate. He'd told her to ask again for the next weekend, after the curse had worn off. He was still on edge about it, and didn't want to be pressed that early in the morning.

On a less amusing note, it was also apparent that Hermione was going to Hogsmeade with Anthony. Harry couldn't imagine why: any class they shared, which were many, they sat next to each other and Hermione showed him up time and time again, clearly on purpose. Neville didn't even try very hard, but every time he gave an answer, which was always correct, Anthony felt shown up once more, almost worse than when Hermione answered everything. It was the most ridiculous thing, and Harry just hoped that Hermione would tire of the charade before very long. Harry, himself, would be keeping company with an irritable Blaise and Neville, alongside Tracey, all of whom didn't have a significant other they would be attending the village with.

If Harry found Alan in Madam Puddifoot's, though, he would never ever let him live it down.

Harry wandered out of the castle that morning wrapped tightly in his clothes and walking beside Salvador and Lucille. Both of them waved to Sybilla, the new caretaker, as they walked out. The woman – young woman, honestly – was sitting by the exit, scanning her paper as the students checked out to go down to the village and occasionally looking at the large doors to the outside. Harry couldn't imagine why, and asked Salvador when he got the chance. Salvador just laughed.

"It's one of the benefits of having a witch to keep the kids in line. If we'd still had Filch – Merlin shrivel his dick, the bastard – he'd probably have been prodding at us with some device or something. Sybilla? She just casts a blanket detection spell on the door and everything going in or out is recorded and noted and if anything's got a curse on it, it'll set off an alarm and get stuck or something to that effect. Her father works for Howard; she knows just about everything there is to know, I swear."

"Nobody knows that much." Harry scoffed.

Salvador just shrugged. “Turn of phrase, Harry. Calm down.”

Conversely, typically, those words put his back up, but Neville just slung his arm around his shoulders – risking a very painful hex had any sort of reaction occurred and saved by dumb luck and the wearing out of the curse – and simply led Harry into the village without seeming to think about it. Upon arrival in Honeydukes, Harry was quite easily plied with candy and then distracted when he noticed Slughorn’s emphatic presence in the store. Slughorn happily came over to smile down at him.

“Harry! Neville, good to see you both, good to see you, Blaise. Who’s this lovely lady on your arm?” He beamed. Blaise quietly introduced Tracey, who merely nodded in acknowledgment and then hid in the shelves behind. Blaise looked like he wished he could follow, but Slughorn wouldn’t have it. “So lovely to see your friends, but Harry. You’ve missed three of my dinners now.”

Harry merely nodded. He’d purposefully avoided those dinners and for no more reason than to avoid being crowded. Neville had been quite annoyed and threatened to haul Harry down to the first one that showed up after Pomfrey pronounced him clean. Harry didn’t mind; he’d quite happily enjoy the moment and enjoy snubbing McLaggen once he could finally pronounce his temper steady – the boy’s attitude hadn’t improved, and he’d missed two of the three practices that had coincided with the dinners.

“Well.” Slughorn continued, undeterred. “I am having another one this Monday evening. Can’t expect to practice in this terrible weather. Do say you’ll come?”

Harry opened his mouth, but something in his face must have indicated how short his temper was. Neville spoke over him.

“He’s still a little delicate, Slughorn, that curse and all, so it’s probably not advisable for him to attend while he’s still suffering. I promise I’ll haul him down to the first dinner after Pomfrey pronounces him clean, but right now he’s sensitive and has a tongue fit for an adder – he really wouldn’t be good company, you know?”

Slughorn showed a surprising sensitivity and nodded, commiserating and wishing Harry a speedy recovery. The care defused his temper and Harry nodded curtly to Neville and offered to buy him some candy. Neville quite happily took him up on it and got himself a deluxe sugar quill.

After Honeydukes, they escaped to the Three Broomsticks and in one of the booths Hermione hesitantly flagged them down. Harry sat beside her immediately and raised his eyebrows. She flushed.

"Anthony and I got quite tired of each other within twenty minutes of leaving the school. He, um, said several very rude things and we decided to part ways ..." She glanced up and noticed Blaise was firmly holding Neville within hearing range and raised her voice minutely, "after I hexed him for insinuating that I was only in it for his looks. I told him in no uncertain terms he was one of the uglier boys I'd met and," her voice lowered again, almost too far, but she was apparently determined to be truthful, "that if he couldn't keep up with me he should just go bed Lavender because no one else would take him."

Harry could tell why she'd not wanted Neville to hear the last part: Neville had slept with Lavender himself, and quite seriously regretted it, but he doubted she'd managed to keep it from him, especially after making sure he'd heard her comment on Anthony's looks. "I can imagine he didn't take that well?"

"He tried to insult Neville again, asked me why I'd want someone who apparently was terrible at sex, and I asked him what sort of moron trusted gossip that started from that harpy anyways, and I believe I repeated what you'd said to her, that if she couldn't keep his interest that was her problem." Hermione turned rather pink. "Honestly, does he think I'm some kind of whore?"

"Apparently." Tracey answered. She delivered a tray full of butterbeer and held out her hand. Harry and Neville handed over the price of their drinks and Hermione flushed before searching her pockets. Harry moved to stop her; Neville had his hand in his pocket and Tracey just laughed lightly. "Enough, Hermione. I'm fine paying for yours, especially if you just gave that uppity pig head the what-for.

Blaise, I'm not paying for yours; no, you can't play the pity card either. Everyone, including you, knows Ginny will be coming back to you any day now anyways. Trust me, if I couldn't stand Theodore, she sure as Hell won't. Pay up."

Blaise pouted but did so. Neville hesitantly took the seat next to Hermione; neither of them looked at each other, but she didn't pull away either. Blaise immediately started talking about Quidditch. Hermione and Tracey snorted. In their circle, talking about Quidditch was a way to break an awkward silence and hide another reaction. Nobody was all that fanatical except for Ron, even if all the boys and some of the girls could hold their own on the topic. If Neville was participating, it just lost any pretence of being an honest topic. Neville barely knew anything of Quidditch and, honestly, couldn't play.

Despite that, the topic lasted several long minutes until Harry found his eye caught and tracking Theodore as he strode out of the Three Broomsticks, looking lost in thought. Not long after, Ginny found their group and locked lips immediately onto Blaise in an apology he was hard pressed to argue against. In the laughter that followed, Harry only knew something else was going on because Neville's eyes tracked someone beyond their booth. He immediately lost it, but made a note to ask about it later.

However, 'later' got postponed upon Harry's return to Hogwarts. Daphne must have been talking to Pomfrey: Harry had only just that morning had her declare that the curse was almost gone, should be gone in two weeks or with a last hurrah of some sort. He wasn't sure how well he trusted that judgement; the months had left their mark in his nervousness. However, he couldn't imagine Daphne greeting him as she did without knowing it – she threw herself at him in an effective imitation of Susan at the get-together at Blaise's.

Harry felt the curse flare immediately and met it with a blazing anger. Without warning, the pain changed abruptly and powerfully to the far more rare effect of almost debilitating pleasure. It was horrible – Daphne was pressed against him so tightly there wasn't any way to hide it. She pulled back – they were, fortunately, down a hall further inside than the Entrance Hall, so the only people present were his friends: Neville and Hermione looked murderous. Harry weakly

brushed them off and leaned against the wall. Daphne was eyeing him curiously, but hadn't pulled away, probably due to deathly curiosity about the strong evidence he wasn't weak with pain pressing against her thigh.

Harry coughed. "Um, I take it you talked to Pomfrey about me earlier, then?"

"Yeah ..." Daphne asked cautiously and then rubbed harder against him. "I thought ..."

"Sometimes the sensation is not pain, Daphne." Harry groused thinly. Neville overheard. He snorted, and ushered Hermione off with him. The others snorted with various mirth and left; Tracey called after herself, "Remember to keep it safe, you two!" Harry couldn't help but blush.

"So." Daphne asked carefully, "Should that be everything of it?"

"It should from what she said..." Harry offered cautiously. Daphne certainly knew how to make him hopeful about it, at least.

"Mhm." Daphne nodded and then quickly grabbed his hand. "Tracey did say there was a closet near the Hospital Wing. Let's go ask the surgeon herself, okay?"

Harry's head, swimming with confusion, hope, and that very demanding remnant of her greeting, let her lead him up the stairs and burst into the doors of Pomfrey's domain. The nurse was immediately ticked off.

"Potter, I told you to not show up here again! What is it this time?"

"Daphne was quite stubborn once you told her there was only one more chance for trouble or a two week wait." Harry blandly answered. "And, well, the little last 'hurrah' you mentioned was ... different than I expected. So I'm not arguing with her."

Pomfrey blinked and told him to stand still while she checked. After several spells, Pomfrey was smiling, Harry was blushing, and Daphne

was almost bouncing for joy. "Well, Harry, I must say you don't have any more arguments left. The curse is completely gone. I trust your father taught you enough of the birds and the bees I don't need to tell you to be cautious while dealing with that, hm?"

Harry could tell he was furiously red and quickly shook his head before Daphne was hauling him away again and bringing them to a closet off the side of the hall. Several minutes later, and the loss of both their shirts, Harry pulled back for a moment and swore, panting slightly. Daphne made an inquiring sound and stopped sucking at his earlobe to ask what on earth he was thinking. Harry chuckled lightly.

"I'm stuck going to Slughorn's party this Monday."

Daphne clocked him on the ear for that one.

A/N: Hah. Stuff. Story. Improvements. Romance! (I can't believe I'm writing romance. Silly teenagers and their hormones) Action ... Action will return. Promise. Eventually. *glances over plans* Yeah, action. See you then? Tell me what you think? There's at least one pairing I'm willing to take votes on just in case...

And, on that note, any of you speechables have an opinion on me possibly changing the title to "The Prince-Who-Lived" rather than "Those-Who-Lived"?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-five

Alan had to admit that the most interesting thing about dating Luna was when she would abruptly decide they were going to do something. Usually, in those instances, it was something bizarre. Currently, said unexpected activity had pulled him away from his homework once he only had Ancient Runes left – a class he could afford to miss homework on because of his excellent scores – and now they were wandering the seventh floor, looking for something Alan hadn't the first clue about. Luna was staring at the walls until she finally stopped at a tapestry. Alan took a moment to look it over, and then started laughing. Luna sniffed.

“Silly men do silly things.”

“Training trolls for ballet doesn’t strike me so much as silly,” Alan snorted, “as the stupidest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Well.” Luna laughed at him momentarily. “You must admit there is that.” She then turned abruptly around and stared at the blank wall opposite.

“What are you looking for over there?”

“Something to do with the number three.” Luna dreamily announced. “But what, I cannot be sure.”

Alan shrugged and walked over to the wall, staring at it for a long time and then running his hand along the stones as he slowly walked down the length to where a portrait got in the way. He turned around and did the same, looking lower down and wondering what on earth Luna could be thinking about – there was a much better place for this in the library, with a cushioned chair ... the second try hadn’t opened anything, and Alan turned and stalked back to Luna, fully intent on distracting her so thoroughly her foolish notion of exploring further in the area would flee her thoughts, and they could get back to the library, which had a chair perfect for his ideas...

“Oh, thank you, Alan!” Luna beamed and ran over to the wall. Alan could only stare at where she had been. He hadn’t done anything.

That wall had most stubbornly been a wall. He knew how to find secrets, thank you. He turned and blinked rapidly at the door Luna was looking through. After a moment she pulled back out and shut the door, pouting.

“That wasn’t what I was looking for, Alan.” Luna answered, her tone flat but amused. “We need a room other than the library. Hmm, I should try … this…”

“Luna, what the Hell...” Alan really felt he should be used to this, but c’mon! How she managed to be so strange was beyond his comprehension.

“One moment!” She called, pleasantly. She was retracing his steps, stalking from one side to the portrait as she trailed her hand in imitation of him, back from the portrait to the alcove with the large vase, and then turning and flouncing back to Alan. Before Alan’s eyes, a door materialized in the wall, as basic and typical as the castle got. Alan could only blink.

“See?” Luna purred. “There’s something important in that room, and we need to find it. Come, then we can go find a nice comfy spot.”

Alan sighed and pulled the door open – and stopped. “Luna, this is going to be impossible!”

The room was the size of a cathedral, the windows tall and musty, leaking diffused light through the labyrinthine alleys of broken furniture and random, scattered items. He could only compare it to a garage sale on a mammoth scale, of items more or less worthless and far more insane. Luna, typically, was unmoved, but her eyes looked tight. That, more than anything calmed Alan down.

“Do you even know what we need to find?”

“I don’t.” Luna answered softly. “But … I might be able to narrow it down...” She fumbled at her bag and pulled out a small, purple crystal. “I knew I found this in the library for a reason.” She murmured.

“When did you find that?”

"My second year." She murmured. "I think it fell out of Neville's bag, but I know he won't miss it. He hasn't yet. Can you conjure me a string, Alan?"

Bemused now, Alan did so and Luna spent a minute or two tying the string on just so. Alan just sighed and glanced over the items nearby. He glimpsed at least two rusted swords beside a necklace he wouldn't have touched with a stick it was so ugly and so coated in a cascade of magic. Further down, he thought he saw a small cache of brooms underneath a hovering fanged Frisbee, and in front of him was a noble looking chair with something growing out of the cushion and waving threateningly as he drew nearer. Alan quickly backed off and glanced at Luna. Her eyes were closed and she was spinning the crystal over her right hand, palm up. The circle had become lopsided – the crystal was mainly aiming sidelong, and then Luna dropped it into her hand and glanced down. She smiled and pointed.

"It's left, the first left."

Alan didn't argue, but simply led the way. "What are you feeling that you're so sure something is in here?" Alan queried.

"It's something that feels like you." She answered.

"But I've never been in here before." Alan pointed out; on impulse, he quickly tugged a curtain down and grimaced as it revealed a chair covered in dark bloodstains and reeking of rot. Underneath the chair was a cage with a fuzzy blob inside, immobile. He didn't look.

"It's not you-you." Luna hummed. "It's another part of you. I've felt it before, about other things." She tilted her head patiently and then stopped, dropping the crystal down and starting it swinging again. Alan wished she'd moved at least a few more feet away from the disgusting chair, but took the chance to cover his nose and look at the fuzzy thing underneath. It was a rather stale looking chinchilla of sorts, except covered in long brown fur. Alan imagined it was probably petrified. The hair was getting rather stiff and beginning to degrade, and its eyes, while wide open, were coated in dust. Alan simply shrugged it off and moved to the other side of the aisle. This

was a small jewellery box, again cursed, sitting on a side table that quivered at his approach. Alan backed off and checked on Luna. This time the circle had changed to swinging forwards. Luna dropped the crystal into her hand and confirmed it.

“Further ahead.”

Alan led the way once more. They walked down a long ways, passing a blistered cabinet, and coming across a bicycle. Alan had to laugh at the rusted penny-farthing bike someone had brought here and stowed for whatever reason. It was leaning on an intricate headboard someone had blown a hole through, and beside it was something making growling and snapping noises. When Luna paused again to consult her dowsing once more, Alan began to glance round, trying to find the source of the sound without touching anything. He didn’t want to know if some of this could bite. He hadn’t found it by the time Luna spoke up with a slightly confused tone,

“Back. We need to go back. Alan, let me lead.”

Alan stood and nodded, letting Luna go first. She walked slowly, swinging the crystal in a circle and staring only at it as she moved. It was a slightly oblong circle, swinging to her right and ahead, and back to her left on a diagonal. Alan presumed the correct place was the one facing her right but shrugged it off. He began to scan that wall, and found the blistered cabinet, and ugly bust, a few rolled carpets and a chair, leaning back to back with a bent lance and a dresser in the next aisle over. Luna came abreast of the cabinet and hesitated before walking slowly past it. Several paces later, she stopped and pointed at the cabinet.

“It’s somewhere over there.”

Alan blinked at her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes...” Luna hummed and blinked. “As sure as I can be. Alan, this is important. The last time I felt like this, it was the cup.”

Alan stepped back, stunned. “The horcrux?”

"Yes!" She snapped. "And I don't know why they feel like you!"

Alan realized that was what was disturbing her most. It didn't really surprise him; he was connected to Voldemort in some way but apparently Luna found it disturbing and hated it. Alan turned and opened the cabinet, riffling through it. If it was a horcrux that made things several times easier: he was looking for something that actually looked significant, not a broken dowel or a rusted cage with a five-legged skeleton, both of which he could immediately discard as possibilities. Most certainly everything else he'd used so far had been significant – Slytherin's Locket and that fancy golden cup – and Alan couldn't imagine him settling for less.

The cabinet held nothing, but Alan tapped the walls, drew out the drawers and scanned the top of it all the same. He glanced back at Luna, but she was stubbornly refusing to look; she was standing on the other side of the aisle, hugging herself and fitfully glaring at the crystal dangling from her hand as though it had done her some personal wrong. Alan brushed it off and began to look through the items on the right side. He found a wig, a bag full of broken nails, a few bones, and some crumbly bits that smelled strongly of mould. The desk underneath tried to slam its drawer shut on his hand. Alan glared at it, and moved to the left side; he'd only fight that desk if he had to, thank you very much.

The other side had the gleaming bust, a mess of scattered papers, and a dusty old quill sitting on a stack of books on a chair with a cracked leg. Alan couldn't find anything there, and finally he lifted the bust off the books and set it aside. A tarnished tiara fell onto the books from behind the bust, and Alan moved to shift it aside before he realized it was enchanted. He blinked, and frowned at it. How was he going to get to those books if he had to deal with a cursed piece of jewellery? Irritably, Alan took the quill and prodded it out of the way and onto the floor before dusting off the book beneath. Luna gave a soft gasp and Alan turned to find her reaching for the tiara.

"Luna, don't touch that, it's cursed!"

"It's not cursed," Luna dreamily answered. "I think this is Ravenclaw's diadem." She purred. Uncaring of Alan's warning, she touched it and

then froze. Alan felt his heart nearly stop in the second she took to speak again, "No..." She panted. "This is the horcrux."

Alan wasn't sure that was a much better announcement. At least he could get clean; he was coated in dust. "Luna? Are you alright?"

"Yes." She answered. She straightened without picking the diadem up and hugged her arms around herself. "We need to get that to Dumbledore." She pointed out breathily.

"Luna, are you sure you're alright?" Alan asked again, quickly grabbing two of the pieces of parchment and quickly folding them into a pouch, sticking the ends together before scooping up the tiara with it and shaking it down inside. Luna merely nodded, disturbed, and watched him go. After a moment, when they were walking back out, she asked,

"Why did you disregard it?"

Alan flushed. "I hadn't thought Voldemort would choose such a feminine accoutrement. Guess I should have known better after the locket and the cup."

Luna laughed brightly, and held open the door for Alan. Alan stepped out and disillusioned the parchment sleeve before bowing Luna further down the corridor and on to the long walk to Dumbledore's office, spelling as much dust off as he could. They arrived at the same time as Green was stalking upstairs; Alan wasn't going to argue with that luck. Naturally, Green looked them both over thoroughly, and, after Alan brandished it slightly, squinted at the disillusioned parchment in his hand.

"Peopled don't tend to disillusion their homework." Green pointed out acerbically.

Alan just shrugged; Green was just moody sometimes, especially when he wasn't allowed in his lab. "This isn't homework. You might even enjoy it." Green simply frowned, and Alan sighed. "This is for Dumbledore. Can you let us up?"

"Yeah." Green nodded. "You caught him on a good day; he's actually in. He's been disappearing, so it's getting rather annoying. I'd wanted to talk with him last week." He groused.

Alan laughed softly. "There is that. Thank you."

Green just shrugged and stepped onto the revolving staircase, Alan and Luna behind him. Upstairs, they stepped out and Dumbledore glanced up in surprise. "Mr. Prince." Dumbledore nodded. "What a pleasant surprise."

"This is probably even more pleasant." Alan grinned, cancelling the spell and tossing the makeshift sleeve onto this desk. "Found that in a hidden room upstairs."

Dumbledore murmured a spell and tapped the parchment. The top layer went invisible, revealing the tiara underneath.

"Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure." Luna recited. "It's Ravenclaw's diadem."

"And it's a horcrux." Dumbledore murmured. "A terrible loss, but an unavoidable one. Green, can you take care of it?"

Green nodded sharply, his eyes glittering with interest, and picked up the sleeve. He glanced at Alan before speaking up, "Will you come meet with me to check on its destruction? I wanted to talk to you about Slughorn again; he's getting annoying."

Dumbledore nodded shortly, and Green quickly slipped back downstairs. Alan moved to follow, but Dumbledore softly asked him to stay. Alan obeyed, curious. Dumbledore took a moment to rub at his eyes; he looked very tired and finally he smiled up at Alan, his expression delicately strained.

"Sir?" Alan offered.

"Alan, child," Dumbledore began but quickly cut himself off as Alan frowned. "Alan, I am most pleased you brought that to me."

"Luna insisted on finding it, sir. I just got covered in dust." Alan added.

"It was most noble of you to do so, and to listen to her." Dumbledore smiled honestly, finally. "And I thank you, Luna, for finding it."

Luna's expression was torn again. Alan reached over and pulled her against his side, having to quickly shove the sensation away as she snuggled against him; Merlin, she knew how to be distracting! Dumbledore was still watching, and the way he was smiling at him made it clear he could guess what the sensation was doing to him – the smile had become genuine.

"I should also inform you that that was the last horcrux I believe we needed to find." Dumbledore added. Alan blinked.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"We have found and destroyed six, Alan. The diary. The locket. Nagini, who died when Neville rescued Harry. I found a ring in the house of Tom Riddle's mother and destroyed it over the summer, and Pettigrew brought us the cup. And you have found the diadem. I can only imagine Tom Riddle finding a sweet power in the idea of a seven-part soul – the most powerfully magical number, indeed. And using horcruxes, to make himself immortal..."

"But he's mortal now, then?" Alan asked cautiously. "He has no more horcruxes."

"He has no more, as far as we can be sure." Dumbledore answered. His expression was sad; Alan felt he must have missed something, been lied to, but Dumbledore suddenly fixated on Luna next to him, and asked, "Alan, what do you know of love?"

Alan blinked abruptly. Did he just...? He wouldn't have. Would he? What?

"I imagine you were raised in the best environment, or at least one that was exceedingly caring." Dumbledore continued, apparently stubborn on that nebulous point.

"If a tad careless," Alan agreed.

Dumbledore's eyes crinkled. "The very same. Now, Alan, please tell me. You remember the prophecy?"

"Yes..." Alan drew the word out and looked worriedly down at Luna. He hadn't mentioned the prophecy to anyone. However, Luna both looked unsurprised and glared up at him; Alan gave up and turned his glare to Dumbledore, daring him to let the laughter on his face become any more pronounced. Dumbledore smoothed the look off most of his face, but his eyes were twinkling.

"Do you recall the line of the prophecy speaking of the 'Power He Knows Not'?"

Alan raised his eyebrows. "Indeed. Do you believe you know it?"

Dumbledore's twinkling was worse now. "I do believe I do, and I do believe you have some grounding in it."

"Oh, love!" Luna piped up. "Love is the most fascinating power."

Alan glanced down at Luna sceptically to find her staring back up at him with a bright smile. Alan looked up at Dumbledore, mildly hoping for it to be countered, but when he found him smiling still, Alan wasn't exactly surprised.

"Love?" Alan asked sceptically. It was just so ... typical ... and kinda pathetic.

"Yes, Alan, love." Dumbledore smiled. "I suppose you are unaware as we have not made a point to share much news with you and neither have you asked, but it has been confirmed through several sources that abruptly in the middle of summer, Voldemort flew into a terrible temper for no apparent reason before locking himself in his quarters. Would you, perhaps, know the reason for that?"

"Summer?" Alan asked, trying not to blush. He didn't think he was succeeding. Oh, to have forgotten Geoffrey's warning like that! And reminded of it, when the adults couldn't have known... "Indeed?"

"Yes." Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, damn him. "However, I don't believe you experienced any bad effects at that time, did you?"

Alan wordlessly shook his head, and then coughed. "Er, are you sure its 'love'?" Couldn't they get off the topic of him and Luna while she was in the room?

"Does it sound weak, to you, Alan?" Dumbledore's tone had become serious again. It didn't help his blush any.

"Well, just a bit, yeah." Alan offered.

"Are you afraid to love? Do you not hold anything dear?" Dumbledore asked.

"No..." Alan answered carefully, not liking the interrogation. Really, what self-respecting teenager would admit to that anyways? And nothing was important to him, not really... Alan quickly revised the thought as Luna began to draw circles on his back; his face flushed again. "Well, yes, but... Sir, this isn't making sense."

Dumbledore only smiled. "Perhaps we should continue the conversation when you are less ... distracted."

Alan nodded. "Yeah, probably."

"Perhaps you could come visit sometime at your leisure with your friends? I've promised Harry a talk as well."

"That'd be more difficult." Alan hedged. "Sixth year is butchering us."

"It does that indeed. There is little hurry. Everything seems to be in hand, Alan, so do not worry yourself. Things are going better than I could have anticipated."

Alan didn't even bother to understand that, and just shrugged it off and left. He could hear Dumbledore chuckling softly, and a final few words, "I suppose Voldemort won't be in a good mood tonight, either ... fitting, for it to be Samhain."

Alan blushed again. It's not like he was wrong, but the Headmaster isn't supposed to know about that. Maybe he could try and figure out how to fix that ... leak, or whatever it was... After a few minutes, however, Alan glanced up at Luna, who was dragging him along, and tugged on the arm she was holding. They were almost back up the stairs to the room they'd been in earlier and she stopped, curious. He folded his arms over her shoulders and pulled her back against his chest, staring at the wall ahead.

"Luna, do you think there's power in love?"

"You said last year nothing destroys Occlumency like teenaged hormones." She teased.

"That's more of a weakness." Alan groused.

"You never felt anything during the summer, after we made love. Dumbledore said Voldemort was hacked off at that."

"But why?"

Luna shrugged under his, oblivious to his frustration. "Maybe he's gay?"

"What?"

Luna glanced up at him innocently. "Maybe Voldemort is gay. I'm much too much woman for him, then."

Alan could only blink for several moments before she continued; Alan took a minute to realize she was speaking sense again.

"Despite losing your Occlumency when I distracted you, you didn't have any ill effects, so the loss didn't allow Voldemort any leeway and instead caused him pain. I'll assume you were most kindly disposed towards me at the time, most loving, so in that sense there is power in love, and it is a power Voldemort cannot abide."

Alan blinked several times more and frowned. "Luna, I'm not a loving person."

"Do you love me?" She asked blandly.

Alan shook his head and smiled. "Of course I do."

"Then you are loving." She pulled him to move forwards again but Alan refused. She frowned back at him, and Alan tried to explain.

"But Luna, I don't love anyone else. That's not a lot of 'power' if it's only for one person."

"Not Geoffrey?" Luna asked briskly. Alan thought a moment and shook his head. "Blaise? Andrew? Severus?"

Alan shook his head again. "No. I care for them, sure, but they can take care of themselves. I don't love them."

"What about Harry? And Regulus?"

"I love Regulus." Alan answered quickly. "He's, honestly, like a father. I'm not close to Severus."

"And what about Harry? What about Neville?"

"Neville's strong enough on his own. He's a comrade, but he's not close to me." Alan hedged. He didn't look at Luna.

"Alan, what about Harry?"

Alan grimaced. "I don't know. I don't think I love him, he's my best friend, but ... he's..."

Luna glanced at him for a long moment, slipped her hand into her bag and pulled out a card at random. She glanced at it, and slipped it back inside. Alan looked at her, curious, but she reached up and tugged him forward again. Alan had to concentrate on keeping his feet for several minutes, and finally, when she released him to pace

in front of the wall, Alan took the time to catch his breath before grabbing Luna as she returned to him.

“Okay, coy is over. What was that card?”

“The card?” She asked brilliantly. She smiled brightly, kissing Alan’s nose. “Harry is something you already know about. You’ve known it for years.”

Alan couldn’t think of it, himself, and followed Luna into a mock-up of what had to be her bedroom with the odd pictures and round shape. He ignored the images for the time being and pulled her onto the bed, growling, “Luna, that didn’t help!”

Luna kissed him, and while it was pleasant and nice, melt-into-your-shoes good he pulled away and frowned at her again.

“I’m not giving up.”

Luna gave him a slightly exasperated look. “What is your heart’s desire?”

Alan blinked and suddenly remembered: His heart’s desire. His equal. Alan felt an incredulous smile build and he laughed softly. It was Luna’s turn to frown, and she looked so cute Alan couldn’t help but kiss her on the nose in return.

“Harry is my equal.” Alan answered honestly. “And I think we need to give Voldemort something to regret about Samhain, don’t you?”

Luna answered by simply pulling off her shirt and bra in one fell swoop.

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Alan’s high spirits were counter-point to Harry’s own, and in addition he was suffering his own bout of confusion as well. After having an extremely pleasant rendezvous in the closet with Daphne, he was still feeling a bit worried about Susan – because he still liked her. He was about ready to slap himself for the fickleness, but stubbornly carried

on as he had been, attending the Monday dinner party with Neville and going through class feeling a Hell of a lot more relaxed than he had been. The lapse of the curse had reduced his stress so much he went from using Dreamless sleep every night at midnight after waking from a nightmare to once, maybe twice a week. It also added another pleasant dream to the mix, one where it hadn't been an uncomfortable broom closet, and he hadn't remembered he'd had unfinished homework and so did she...

His confusion wasn't helped when it occasionally morphed into Susan Bones.

Neville was additionally in high spirits, something everybody was teasing him for as it not-so-coincidentally occurred at Hermione's split with Anthony Goldstein and a resulting shouting match during Defence that ended with Severus pronouncing them an excellent choice to demonstrate a silent duel – one that Hermione had won almost instantaneously against the pissed off Ravenclaw.

Schoolwork seemed to ease up suddenly, and Harry found himself paying more attention during the Quidditch practices – a factor probably aided by him getting back on a broom and nearly taking a beater's bat to McLaggen's head. Within five minutes of the first practice he spent in the air, Harry called a halt and waved McLaggen to the ground. The burly seventh year lumbered over and frowned.

"What's the matter, Potter?"

"That's Captain to you, McLaggen." Harry threw at him. "Maybe you should remember it. I gave you leeway in your actions earlier because I wasn't up there to keep an eye on you, but if you don't stop ordering the others around you're off the team."

"You certainly weren't doing a good job of it—" McLaggen blustered, angry.

Harry cut him off with a slash. "No, that was earlier. I certainly couldn't do much about it when I was incapacitated, and Alan wasn't willing to come down on you because he wasn't actually the captain,"

"Like I'd listen to a Slytherin—" McLaggen scoffed.

Harry fell silent and gave McLaggen a grim smile before raising one finger. "That's your second strike. Your first was when I had to pull you down here to tell you off. You've got one more chance, and you're off the team."

"What'll you do if Weasley can't play?" McLaggen demanded, shocked. "You don't have another reserve; none of the others even did half as well."

"Melanie can pinch hit, and Demelza play in the Chasers." Harry grinned insincerely. "And I'd sooner forfeit a game than put in a useless waste of space who can't play with others." McLaggen's face turned bright red as he struggled not to blow up. Harry's grin widened. "So play nice, unless you'd rather leave already, on your own terms."

McLaggen took several deep breaths and smiled bitterly back. "I'll prove you'd be wrong to throw me off the team.

"By all means." Harry agreed, wishing he'd just leave. "Now go play nice. You're reserve, and you bloody well aren't captain."

McLaggen only nodded, flying back up to play as Harry took to the air and watched as they worked together, calling out advice. After that practice, Harry quickly asked Melanie if she thought she could pinch hit as keeper, and got a hesitant agreement. Harry told her to go play with a couple first years or so when they put together a pick-up game, and left her to it. He was looking forward to the first game of the year.

Of course, it couldn't last. Harry felt it was probably poetic justice that the night before the match, he had a nightmare and didn't have any Dreamless Sleep. Morning found him with his head on his arms at the breakfast table, Ron chivvying the other team members to eat and be ready to go since Harry wasn't up to it. Partway through the meal, Ginny elbowed him and smiled despite his haggard appearance.

"Vaisey's in the hospital wing, you know." She pointed out. "And the sky's lovely and blue and Malfoy is glaring at your back, as per usual. He looks a bit peaky himself."

Harry sighed and sat up, running his fingers through his hair. "I'll be fine. Thanks Ginny."

"No problem." She beamed. "Don't get hit with a bludger, would you? We don't need to pull in Demelza, okay?"

"Yes, Ginny." Harry grinned. "I hear you."

"Great. Now, come along. Alan's already promised to have his wand out, Dumbledore's gonna be there, and Madam Hooch has been told to keep an eye out for falling Seekers."

Harry laughed again, and felt a little better. There were no worries about him ending up in pain due to wind impact; after testing it with Daphne, Neville had returned to his habits of slinging his arm over Harry's shoulder and teasing him about his lack of height. He would do fine, provided he didn't have a panic attack in the air or a flashback. Besides, if he did he was good enough to get back on his broom, right?

Surely.

Well, he just stubbornly wouldn't run into those problems. They could wait till he returned to the ground.

The match started, Harry smiling threateningly at the Slytherin captain Urquhart as they shook hands – and tried to wring the other's out of joint. Madam Hooch glared between them and gave the whistle; and they were up in the air and a high pitched, female voice came through the commentator's mike.

"And the teams get off to a great start, we've got Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, and the line-up looks pretty fair. Gryffindor is maintaining their habitual female Chaser line, while Slytherin has the archaic idea that women don't play sports. In fact, Gryffindor has Potter's little sister in the Beater position; I can hardly imagine how she can even manage without getting knocked off her broom, so I expect some pretty fancy playing today!"

Harry looked down and found a small head of black, curly hair standing in the commentator's box – he suspected she was on a stool or something: the commentator was Sable Hodges, and she must have had a bucket-full of sugar for breakfast to sound that excited. Maybe it was a first year thing, but man – he hadn't been that hyper, had he?

"And Urquhart streaks up the pitch with the quaffle in hand, come to challenge Mr. Weasley – and it's saved, Weasley drops the quaffle off with his sister and she's back down the line to shoot on the Slytherin keeper. It seems that Quidditch must run in families in this case, as the Weasleys have had players on the Gryffindor team almost every year they've been at this school, not to mention Miss Potter's stunning ferocity with those bludgers that probably weigh more than she does."

Harry laughed as Nanna shouted in offence, still grinning widely. Harry was circling, waiting and watching as Draco circled opposite, a glare fixed in his direction.

The game went much in the positive vein. Katie gracefully led Ginny and Melanie around the pitch, passing and feinting in all directions and getting score after score through the other side. Ron had missed only one goal – during which he'd been fouled, and Melanie had made the penalty shot that resulted. Draco was looking paler than ever, and he viciously glared at Harry, trying to ram him and other cruelties – but when Gryffindor was a hundred points up, Harry suddenly shot straight through the Chasers once more, skirting the commentator's platform. Draco, appropriately, followed him frantically – Harry was indeed chasing the snitch, and so focused he didn't notice Draco yelling at him, didn't notice until he'd snagged the snitch and come to a stop, holding it proudly aloft. Gryffindor went wild, Luna's hat roared, and Draco was suddenly and abruptly hexed off his broom, Neville bearing down on him like a storm cloud. Harry landed quickly and headed him off, grabbing his arm, confused as Hell.

"Neville, what the Hell got into you?"

Neville stopped, tense as a pillar, and didn't answer. Harry frantically tried to think of what could have transpired – they had flown past

where Neville was sitting, sure, but Harry hadn't heard anything. Draco shouted behind him,

"Oh, that's why! Can't stand your whore plying other wares? Despicable, barely fought anything, he did, and doesn't really care what you do, does he, even up to forcing it down his throat!"

Harry's ears roared. That had happened once – he'd been blindfolded. He'd also been sure there'd been only three people present: Lucius, Voldemort, and one other. One other. He felt his face blank, and Neville pulled out of his grip, running to attack and Harry didn't stop him, merely sank to the ground, spiralling in darkness and trying to forget.

When he could see again, someone was supporting him, helping him walk up to the castle. Neville was stalking ahead, sullenly remaining one step behind McGonagall, and everyone was murmuring around him. Harry growled and tried to straighten. Ron quickly asked, "Are you all right?"

Okay, Ron holding him was fine. He was nearly as tall as Alan and broader, so that was peachy, really. "Yeah, I'm all right. What happened?"

"Neville hexed Malfoy into a shivering ball of slime." Ron growled, pleased. "Ruddy git deserved it. Not a lot of people heard him, so I don't know why, but when you just collapsed like that, Hooch and McGonagall weren't too keen on punishing Neville until they knew why. When neither would repeat it, McGonagall gave them both detentions with Ms. Harper – that's the new caretaker. You tend to call her Sybilla."

"Okay." Harry agreed cautiously, getting his feet under him and walking along with Ron. Ron slowed his pace so Harry could keep up in his groggy state, and Harry quickly cursed the memories that kept plaguing him, crippling him. He was only grateful it hadn't happened in the air. "How're our Slytherins?"

"Fine, as far as I can tell." Ron answered. Harry pulled him to a stop and had him wait at the doors, Harry watching the group come up,

laughing and joking. They all came upon them, demanding to know he was all right. Daphne kissed him and lingered to much laughter and Harry's profuse embarrassment, and then they moved inside, happily, pleasantly... Harry waved them off, citing the party in Gryffindor tower, and went upstairs to enjoy himself, and hopefully forget his second collapse in plain view of the school. He supposed he should be grateful it hadn't been worse, but still. It was frustrating to lose control like that.

His anger, and the party, was forgotten twenty minutes later when a student raced up to Gryffindor tower and screamed that someone had just appeared above the lake and fallen in – they hadn't resurfaced. Harry was stunned, and ran down to the shore with everyone else, wishing Gryffindor tower were closer to the front door – even as fast as he could go, it was still more than five minutes before they joined the other students on the shore.

Flitwick and McGonagall were doing something; Harry wasn't tall enough to see, but the crowd was gasping, astonished, panicked – and someone hollered his name. Harry pushed his way forward, breaking out of the crowd and froze. Alan was collapsed on the shore, panting for breath and coughing – he still hadn't taken down a bubblehead charm. Harry cancelled it without thinking and pushed him onto his side, where Alan proceeded to hack and cough himself hoarse, bringing up more water.

Severus burst through the crowd and dropped next to his son, holding out a potion that Alan shakily accepted. He seemed stronger after it; he sat up and Harry rocked back on his heels, hoping everything would be all right, wondering what the Hell was going on. When Alan could finally breathe properly, he glanced over at Harry, then up to the teachers.

"Someone set this up." He croaked. "It was a living chain that attacked me and was a portkey over the lake. God, that was a strong animation charm, and," He took a moment to cough, "that's a fucking deep lake." He finished weakly. "Cold, too."

Severus pulled his son to his feet and frowned at McGonagall. The Gryffindor Head of House straightened and parted the students

beyond, leading the way into the school. Harry watched her go feeling lost, and a bit afraid.

Strike four. Who's out? Who's trying to kill him?

Harry hated that he didn't know what was going on. Someone was out for Alan's life, someone who was apparently resourceful, and capable of getting at several complicated items. Poison in his food. Discrete spells. Invisibility. And now, a complicated trap of a portkey and that chain. Animated chains were not easy to get a hold of, much less add a portkey to. Harry glanced at Flitwick.

"Shouldn't you get the chain out of the lake, or see if it's even still there?" Harry asked carefully.

Flitwick frowned at the water. "That would be quite deep, but if Professor Dumbledore were to ask the merpeople... I think that would do it. Return to your house, Potter, Prince should be just fine."

Harry had trouble believing him, but wasn't going to not believe him. Pomfrey knew what she was doing; she would have Alan in hand, and Harry had homework to do, much as he loathed the necessity. He could check in on Alan later ... after. Ron was silent as Harry caught up with him again, Hermione gently putting her arms around him and walking with him back up to Gryffindor tower, where the party had essentially fallen apart with most of the Quidditch team worried about their friend, no longer gung-ho enough to keep the spirits up. Harry didn't care. He was just worried. Irritably, Harry pulled out his homework and lost himself in the complicated essays they had to complete.

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Alan had severe bruising – again – and damp lungs from inhaling water before he got his arms and wand free, and was kept over the weekend, released on Monday. Harry had to admit whoever was trying had to be sweating bullets. Four serious tries. Each one had failed, and Alan kept jumping back from them, undeterred, unhindered.

They really should have expected it.

Friday had Potions in the morning; Green had them teaming up and working on a potion together – today, Ron had begged Harry to work with him and Harry had acquiesced, if only to see Hermione and Neville working together, so painfully polite to each other that Harry had to stifle his laughter half the time. Working with Alan's additional notes on the potion, Harry and Ron were doing fine. They were three quarters of the way done – the potion was highly unstable and required minute attention to details –

Alan's cauldron exploded.

Harry was knocked out of his seat as Alan fell onto him, screaming hoarsely. Daphne was shrieking in the background, and Harry saw Michael Corner helping Blaise to his feet. He had to swallow hard: Blaise's face was puckered and blistered, brilliantly red. Green was by his side immediately, and threw a thick phial to Harry.

“Pour it over his face, now, get his hands as well!”

Harry fumbled with the phial, too shocked to really think, and Theodore suddenly crouched next to him, forcing the cork out and pouring the viscous fluid over Alan's face and hair. His skin, pale to begin with, was even more painfully red. Theodore stopped after he'd pretty much coated his head, and picked up Alan's hands, which were just as blistered. There was barely enough left. Green stood, Blaise's arm held firmly around his shoulders, Michael Corner bracing his other side.

“Ron, pick up Alan. Try not to brush any of the residue. Neville, you're on the other side. Harry, go find Slughorn in his office and then meet me up at the Hospital wing. God save any of you morons if you do anything in my absence. Don't touch your potions or your equipment. Everyone step back from your tables.”

A short glare from him around the room had everyone away from their tables. He doused all the fires and abruptly a shiny barrier appeared around each table.

"Don't try anything against those shields. Hermione, you and Mr. Macmillan are in charge. If anything else happens in here while I'm gone, one of you will be cleaning up this mess by yourself, you got that? Harry, go."

Harry ran out of the room and quickly found the Potions office nearby. He knocked briskly, and Slughorn poked his head out, blinking carefully at Harry's face. He supposed he looked somewhat ghostly, all told, so it wasn't too surprising Slughorn straightened with a firm expression.

"What do you need, Harry?" He asked quickly.

"There was a bad accident during class. Green needs to leave to take Alan and Blaise to the Hospital wing. I assume he wants you to assist with clean up, since the potions are all ruined."

"Very well." Slughorn nodded. "What potion were you making?"

Harry blinked and then shrugged. "Um, it was the Grand Brendlizen Syrup."

Slughorn looked startled for a moment and then moved a little faster. "I assume the fires were put out?"

"Yes." Harry answered, "and he solidified his barriers or something. Nobody can touch their stuff right now."

"Merlin bless that man's shielding power. Very well. Are you needed elsewhere?"

"I'd like to go check up on Alan." Harry hedged. "Please." Harry stopped outside the door and wrung his hands. He really didn't want to be stuck down here ...

"Someone needs to be getting your stuff together." Slughorn pointed out.

"I'll be back before long, I promise. Green told me to meet up with him."

Slughorn's face softened. "Very well. Go."

Harry nodded and turned to run upstairs. There were few people in the halls, a couple seventh years, a few younger students. Harry couldn't get to the Hospital wing fast enough, and he came in, panting slightly and gazing feverishly around the room.

"Harry!"

Harry turned and found himself face to face with Green who frowned down at him. "There are showers in the back room. Go in there and rinse yourself with cold water, clothes and all and pass them out. I've sent a house elf for a change of clothes. You can't leave any of that stuff on you, even if you can't feel it. It's non-reactive to water; get in there."

Harry blinked, stunned, and Green shortly chivvied him back with a threat to start stripping him out there. He was called away by a frantic Poppy, but left Harry with a glare that told him he knew how to make someone do what he wanted no matter how stubborn they were. He'd probably learned it from his brothers dealing with him. Obediently, Harry took the bitingly cold shower, gasping as he waited till he was soaked to strip out of his sopping wet clothes and then rinse off again, stepping out to eagerly towel off and change into the dry clothes laid out. He stepped out and Green singled him out again, frowning and casting several spells his direction. He frowned and, after glancing Poppy's way, strode over.

"Alan and Blaise will be fine. The potion exploded into a corrosive steam; they need to have their skin regrown, as it was as bad as a third degree burn. Both of them will be fine, eyes, hair, skin and all. They'll just be in the hospital wing all weekend. You need to go downstairs and pick up your stuff. If you find any part of you breaking out in a rash, come immediately to the hospital wing. Any transfer might slowly be taking effect if it wasn't fully washed off. Your clothes will be treated and returned to you."

Harry nodded, his throat tight, before Green ushered him out with orders to return to the class. Harry didn't leave immediately, and finally called, "Green!"

Green's red hair gleamed as he turned back, plainly irritated.

"What happened?"

Green flinched and sighed. "One of them messed up for some reason. There's no current way to tell; Poppy knocked them both out and they won't wake until at least tomorrow evening for their own sakes."

Harry winced and nodded, leaving quickly. He wouldn't want to be awake in their condition either. He wandered back down to the dungeons, deep in thought, coming back only to the conclusion that answers would have to wait for Saturday, a thought that didn't leave him very happy.

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Sunday afternoon, when visitors were finally allowed in, didn't hold any real answers either. Alan was ecstatic to see him at least, as he'd become tired of –stubbornly- doing homework through thin gloves since he'd been woken up that morning. Pomfrey wasn't allowing anyone to get near his bed, so all they could do was talk – both his and Blaise's skin was still tender and vulnerable. Harry found it a bit awkward to be talking to him, with his face and hands painfully raw, but toughed it out. He was rewarded by Alan's warm smile.

Alan was better off than Blaise. Blaise had been the one to make the mistake, and he'd been much closer than Alan and he had less of a defensive reflex. His left eye had extensive damage. Pomfrey was saving it, but it was going to take at least a week – Blaise was less than pleased, but vain enough to put up with it. He did have the blessing that his hands were fine; he'd been wearing his dragonhide gloves, gloves Alan had overconfidently left off to work with ingredients – timing that must have been purposeful. When Harry did manage to talk to Blaise, it took several long minutes but he finally got him to answer– he was sure he must have fallen victim to the Imperius. All it had taken was a single action to set the potion off.

The news brought a chill to Harry's spine. If that was the case, this wasn't an accident – it was attempt number five on Alan's life.

A/N: Well, stuff. Explosions, risk of death, fun. Oh, and horcruxes.
grins Should I offer bonus points for guessing who's trying to kill Alan, or is it too obvious?

Next chapter: More hormones (I know, yuck, but it just happened and I don't know why!) but there's politics and then... *rubs hands together and cackles* Then I can promise you action. *collapses into evil laughter*

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-six

Harry was more than pleased that Alan was back to normal less than a week after that accident. Alan shrugged it off like it was nothing, and reminded him he'd had worse potions accidents before that were not engineered. Blaise wasn't quite so blasé about it, but then again, he had to suffer through bad pirate jokes due to his wearing an eye patch for the week after to allow his eye to heal properly. Only Ginny was allowed the liberty to play-act with him as a pirate, mostly because she was his lovely damsel.

Harry was just glad he had the freedom to laugh about it upstairs while Blaise was holding his 'damsel' 'hostage'.

The Christmas season was broached with Harry abruptly growing some again, making him markedly taller than Hermione, something he considered a thing to be grateful for. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one grateful for it. Several girls also noticed he was attending Slughorn's parties and he had the bad luck to be seen dressed up going to and from them – and when word got around he hadn't asked anyone to the Christmas party, he started having to duck and dodge through secret passageways just to avoid the mistletoe. At least he wasn't alone – Neville often followed him, not wanting to risk one of the girls considering him as good a piece of meat as Harry. After four days of it, Harry swore to ask the next tolerable girl he saw – and nearly swallowed his tongue when it was Susan. Naturally, she noticed his gulp and sat down next to him at the library table.

"That was a loud noise, Harry." She pointed out shyly.

Harry shrugged, wishing he wasn't blushing so hard. "Just thinking about – stuff." Note to self: do not mention that girls are annoying to a girl.

Susan raised her eyebrow. "Having a little trouble with flirts?"

"Just a wee bit." Harry hedged. "Nothing really can deter a Gryffindor."

"I'm sure if you had a date to the party, they'd leave you alone." Susan pointed out.

Harry snapped up the lead. "Are you offering to go?" Harry smiled easily. He knew that game, at least; he just hoped she wouldn't slap him for it. Instead, she gave him a shrewd look.

"Why haven't you asked Daphne?"

Harry opened and closed his mouth before snapping it shut. Why hadn't he? Because he wasn't sure which girl he wanted to take more. Oh, Merlin, Mary and Mordred, why hadn't he asked Hermione?

Because he wanted Neville to. Dammit. Trapped in his own choices.

"I'm not entirely sure how I feel about her." Harry finally managed.

"And you're taking me as second fiddle?" Susan asked archly. Harry scowled back at her.

"You did get asked to the Yule Ball, you know." He pointed out. "Daphne got a snog in a broom closet because she stalked and ambushed me."

"She almost hurt you!" Susan snapped. "You were still cursed."

Harry flushed slightly. "Well, I said she was stalking me. She apparently got it out of Pomfrey that the curse was almost dead and if there was one more incitement of it, it'd wear itself out and ... well, you know how fine a line between pleasure and pain it is. The last bit wasn't pain." He finished. "And, well, I wasn't arguing after that."

Susan giggled lightly. "Oh my. That had to be ... interesting."

"It was very embarrassing." Harry admitted. "So, are you too offended to take advantage of the fact that you're here, I need a date, and Daphne's not got a monopoly yet?"

"I don't know." Susan hedged. "Are you sure Pomfrey hasn't got that monopoly you speak of?"

"Pomfrey?" Harry gaped. "Madam Pomfrey?" That was just low!

Susan giggled, and patted his hand. "It's alright, Harry." She said solemnly. "I know how it sometimes is, older women ..."

Harry exaggerated his horrified reaction and shook his head violently. "No, no no no! Just no, Susan, no! Please, cease and desist!"

"What do I get out of it?" Susan asked innocently.

"I don't know, what do you want?" Harry asked from where his head was buried in his arms, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "I already offered everything I had, you horrible woman!"

"Can I get the same treatment Daphne got?"

Oh, she was blushing now. Harry was glad his head was already on his arms because he was feeling dizzy he was so red. The only consolation was that Susan looked as red as he felt. Quickly, Harry answered, "Anything!" His voice squeaked slightly.

Susan nodded rapidly. "Why thank you. When's the party, and where?"

Harry refused to lift his head. He was embarrassed enough. "Slughorn's quarters, on the twentieth. I can pick you up from Hufflepuff at eight if you don't want to meet me in the Entrance Hall. Just dress up nicely, much like the Yule Ball though probably a little less fancy."

Susan nodded, patted him on the cheek, and then pulled out her homework. "Would you help me with this?" She asked. "I don't understand the Arithmancy in this instance."

Harry lifted his head, hoping against hope he wasn't still blushing, and bent down the give the work a look. This was much less stressful. And hopefully it would get around quickly that he was taking Susan to the party. Maybe then the girls would leave him alone.

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Two hours since they came to their agreement, Neville stormed in, blazingly angry.

“If Sophie Roper asks me if I’m getting my ‘needs’ met one more time, she is going to lose her lips!”

Harry glanced quickly up from where he was working with Susan and winced as his friend slammed his books down and fell into the chair. Susan quickly studied her nails and asked,

“Do you want me to threaten Lisa, Megan and Morag to get them off your back? I can at least get Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.”

Neville gave her a pleading look. “Please! If I get any more requests like that, I’m going to injure somebody!”

“Why haven’t you asked someone to accompany you to the party yet?” Susan queried. Harry hadn’t bothered asking; he already knew why. He did not have unfounded hopes about his brother, after all. Neville ducked his head and didn’t answer. Susan’s look turned shrewd. “Neville, just ask her as a friend. Tell her you’re hitting your breaking point, and I’m sure she’ll agree. She’s probably got a few boys giving her doe eyes too, you know, and if she hasn’t accepted she’d probably welcome the reprieve herself.”

Neville failed miserably to keep the hope out of his expression as he nodded shortly. He glanced at his books, apparently confused about what he’d been doing, and Susan put her hand up to stop him from leaving.

“Now pay me back and help me with my Defence essay. I didn’t understand what he’d said about countering a jinx with a hex-base ...”

Neville gave Harry an immediately betrayed look, but he was more amused than anything. Harry just smiled. Susan might be a Hufflepuff, but she was only a Slytherin with fuzzy slippers on sometimes.

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Back in Gryffindor tower, Neville sighed, kicked up his feet and glared around the common room. Hermione wasn't back yet, and Harry just snickered at his put upon expression. Neville shot him a glare.

"You do remember Melanie warned you Romilda was considering love potions."

Harry flinched. "I hate your sister."

"I dunno, Harry," Neville grinned wickedly, "her reasoning has merit."

"It does not!" Harry argued. Oh, he hated Melanie's reasoning. Naturally, Neville quoted it.

"What? He's a big boy; he's fought Voldemort. He can handle a few girls." Neville's falsetto voice drew several stares and short laughs. Harry gave him a death glare.

"Not funny. Just because I survived Death Eaters doesn't mean I can handle a bunch of teenaged girls."

"Aw, why not?" Neville chortled. "They're nice."

"Are you kidding me? Torture's a hell of a lot more forgiving than teenaged girls!"

Ron stopped just shy of their chairs and blinked rapidly. "Okay, I missed part of that conversation."

"Just discussing the ravenous females vying for our flesh." Neville deadpanned. "Sit down, relax, share what it's like to have a normal and sweet little Hufflepuff for a girlfriend rather than that conniving girl Harry's got."

Ron glanced at the fire and put on a dreamy look. Harry wasn't sure if he was faking or not. He wasn't sure which would be scarier.

"Hannah's just nice." He shrugged. "Pretty, sweet, non-demanding, understanding ..."

"Fairly good at Transfiguration." Neville continued.

"That too!" Ron grinned. "Makes things so much easier, working with her!"

"There is always that." Harry allowed. "I hope you enjoy your evening. We'll be stuck in a crowded office with a bunch of nutballs, while all you have to do is stare at your very own vision of loveliness."

Ron blushed the classic Weasley red. Harry heard giggling moments before several girls in the lower years came over, one of which was holding a gillywater and a box of candy. A second look told him it might be Romilda Vane, but she was quite heavily made up, and the angle was bad; her back was to the fireplace.

"Would you like a gillywater, Harry?" She asked carefully.

"Er, no thanks." Harry managed awkwardly... C'mon, he'd survived Antonin and Fenrir, what was a teenaged girl?

"Oh. Well, do you want some cauldron cakes? I think my aunt put firewhiskey in them and I'm not sure I want to try them. Here." She thrust the box into his hand and waited, apparently expecting something. Harry couldn't think of anything but to accept the box, but he would sooner give Voldemort a noogie than eat anything she'd given him. That would be far worse than poison; it'd probably be a love potion. And if this failed, he'd probably be subjected to another attempt...

"Er, Romilda, right?" Harry asked carefully. She beamed at him, and Harry smiled awkwardly back before handing her the cauldron cakes. "I don't really like cauldron cakes, but thank you for the thought."

"Oh," She managed, "but I..." She flushed quickly, apparently at a loss.

Harry smiled crookedly. “If those have a love potion, maybe you should remember they’d wear off anyways and I’d probably be in a worse mood afterwards, hm?”

Oh, that was the wrong thing to say. Romilda looked somewhere between wanting to slap him and burst into tears. Forget girls; he’d rather deal with Death Eaters. At least they made more sense! He turned away and tried to ignore her, but there was an abrupt increase in angry mutterings from the girls off in the corner. He suspected someone started laughing and barely stifled it, but he stubbornly pretended it wasn’t happening and glared at Neville and Ron as they tried to stifle their own laughter. Neville finally managed,

“Mate, I think we should be glad the other girls weren’t here or you’d be in deep shit.”

“Shut up Neville. Girls are worse than torture; I could at least say I wouldn’t die of embarrassment.”

“There is that.” Neville allowed, although his expression became slightly solemn.

Harry sighed and put his head in his hands. Okay. Deep breath. How many days until Christmas break? Twelve? He would survive.

Really.

Shortly after that Harry got to watch Hermione come in and Neville leap to his feet, his hand nervously smoothing down his shirt as he walked over to her and had a quiet conversation. Hermione stiffened immediately at the beginning, but after several minutes she relaxed, smiled faintly, touching Neville’s arm and nodding slowly. Neville grinned and snagged her hand, kissing it gently.

“Thank you for accepting.” He continued, loud enough to be heard around the common room without seeming ostentatious. “I’ll see you ready at eight, then?”

"Yes." Hermione answered, her amusement plain in her voice. "Considering you'll be in class with me all that day, I think I just might remember."

"Good." Neville reluctantly relinquished her hand and joined Harry where he already had all his books together. Neville was slightly pink and didn't respond to Harry's highly amused grin, even as they slipped upstairs. Neville always was good at being stubborn.

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With all the stress about girls and the challenges they presented, it was a surprisingly pleasant but plain evening. Alan had happily brought Luna with him and spent most of the evening talking with Sanguini, as they got along splendidly much to Worple's dismay. Harry and Susan had only stayed for a little while before leaving early to take care of giving Susan a similar evening to the one Daphne had stolen a month or so earlier. Hermione and Neville managed to keep in each other's good graces and were far more comfortable talking together thereafter, and Blaise and Ginny, well... Harry was just glad Ron hadn't been there to see them greet each other, nor bid each other farewell. He would have freaked.

All in all, it was a good start to the Christmas season, and Harry happily returned home and fell into his own bed, still in the large guest room with the pale colours. He was looking forward to relaxing – but Blaise's mother had sent out invitations to all of Blaise's friends, and, according to the invitation, the party was enforced neutrality.

Of course, this wasn't exactly the easiest concept for James to accept, and, after they received the invite, he ranted for nearly ten minutes before Nanna spoke up,

"Dad, what exactly does 'enforced neutrality' mean anyways?"

James slowed down his pacing and glared over at Lily. Lily, the one who had actually read the history books, answered,

"Enforced neutrality is a matter of honour, really." Lily offered. "The different purebloods hold a lot of store by personal honour, and their

reputations. If you have a reputation as dishonourable, people won't trust your word and you'll have trouble doing business and getting marriages, both of which matter a lot in their circles, and if it gets down to the goblins that you won't keep your word, you'll find a lot of trouble with them."

Nanna frowned. "And what does it mean in regards to this party?"

"It means that everyone who attends implicitly agrees to not start anything while at the party." James bit out. "While it means I cannot arrest anyone regardless of what they say, it also means that people like Leopold Nott will also have to hold his tongue in regards to dealing with me."

Harry swallowed. He was mostly hoping it would keep the Kozumpliks in line and Lucille's family. Those were the people he expected to be the most likely to do something dangerous.

Nanna didn't miss his swallow. "Harry?"

"I think part of the biggest thing would be because some of those invited might have taken part in ... what happened over the summer." Harry hedged.

Nanna stared at him for a long moment. "And you want to attend this why?"

Harry scowled at her. "Because I want to go see Blaise and Alan and everyone, and if you remember from what Sirius said, Desdemona Zabini has been looking to find the Order since summer."

"Only because she thinks Dumbledore's side is winning." James groused.

"Isn't that because of Blaise's influence?" Harry shot. "Because he's friends with Alan and Alan with me, bringing him to Ginny and Neville as well?"

James flinched, but Lily answered openly, "Yes, we recognize that Harry, but we don't want to take a foolish risk with our, nor your safety and peace of mind."

"What's to worry about? Neville wants to go as does Ginny. The entire family is invited; which includes godparents, so Sirius is also invited." Harry bit out. "We'll have all the Weasleys, the Longbottoms, Severus and Green for Alan, and the Bones."

"Susan's parents can't attend, but her aunt said she would do so." James pointed out.

"Isn't Hermione invited?" Nanna asked cautiously. "Remus could be her escort. You'd have all the Marauders present."

"And the Hodges will also be attending." Harry stubbornly added. "With them interested in the Weasley twins, they'd be inclined to keep it cool in there, and you can have a chance to talk with them."

James froze and frowned deeply. Lily and Nanna both gave Harry long looks; Lily looked pleasantly surprised and Nanna looked disbelieving. As James walked out muttering to himself about contacting Sirius and Remus, Nanna giggled out,

"Harry, that was so Slytherin it's scary."

Harry just shrugged. "I want to go hang out with my friends. I didn't do anything."

Things did end up moving to allow them all to attend. James talked to Frank and Alice and while he didn't really talk them into anything, the points Harry had made had stuck with him, and their repeat mostly tipped the scales for the Marauders in favour of attendance. Christmas dinner was tense – the children were excited, and the parents were worried. Harry only hoped they could relax once they got there. He strongly suspected Mrs. Zabini would actually have the entire set of neutral precautions in place: there was a ward that could be raised that would immediately sound upon hostile spells. It wouldn't make it much more convenient, but it would at least discourage any spellfights or maliciously cursed food. Everyone

would just have to know poison detection spells, and trust the house elves that were customarily set to discretely watch for anyone adding anything to the food.

The twenty-seventh was tense, but Harry slipped into his dress robes again, pleased they still fit him despite his recent growth, and happily put on his serpent necklace. He brushed his hair back, for whatever good that would do him, and met up with his parents. Sirius was also in attendance, splendid in navy velvet, while his parents were wearing robes Lily must have picked out: crimson with pearlescent white trim for her, and pale grey for him. Oddly enough, James glanced at Harry and then purposefully smoothed down the lapel, a section with silver trim. Harry couldn't imagine what he was hinting at until he realized James was seeking his approval. Harry grinned.

"Nice robes. I'm starting to feel a little underdressed in these." He plucked lightly at the dark brown, but Lily just grinned.

"You look wonderful, Harry. Your robes are fine. Nanna should be down any moment now ... Ah."

Harry looked and had to blink for several moments. Finally, getting his jaw back under control, he frowned.

"Nanna, I can't let you go dressed like that!"

Nanna put her hands immediately on her hips and glared up at him. "Oh, why not?"

"Dillan won't be able to be a gentlemen!" Harry exclaimed. "Merlin, girl, you'll be curling his toes! My sister is not allowed to look that good!"

Nanna grinned and spun around. She was in robes that were more of a gown than Lily's. The sleeves were short and draped loosely, with the collar turned over around the steep v-neck. The colours loosely matched his own dress robes: black satin with heavy green embroidery on the sleeves, bodice, and the hem. The bodice was a dark brown only a shade lighter than the loose skirt. Coming to a stop she grinned at Harry's wry smile and stuck out her tongue.

"I'm wearing them, and I'll just mention you won't be pleased if he doesn't behave himself. Honestly, Harry, I can take care of myself."

Sirius chuckled at that and double-checked the time. "Alright, enough. We need to go through now. You all have everything together?" There was a general agreement, and Sirius went through first, Harry following. He stumbled out in the receiving room, flushing as the severe looking man in a suit stared down his nose at his ungainly landing. Sirius stepped over, brushed him off, and whispered, "They practice that look. Just ignore him; he's a non-entity."

Harry nodded carefully, still feeling out of whack. He wasn't used to servants, although they were typically hired on for evenings like this. It was just expensive; Desdemona wasn't cutting any corners.

Nanna was followed through by their parents, both arriving in a far more stately manner than Harry had managed. Both of them straightened and politely greeted the waiting servant, nodding and exchanging pleasantries. Lily stepped aside to straighten Harry's robes and dust off Nanna's shoulder, before nodding to James. James, in turn, gave the servant an expectant look and he led the way out into the hall and up the staircase to the first floor. Nanna giggled as Harry stared upon leaving the receiving room. The Zabini mansion wasn't as large as the Potter one, but it was very well set up. A thoroughfare ran the length of the house from back patio to front door, several dozen metres long and two stories high. Two walkways crossed from the ballroom to the second story rooms on the left, above the receiving room they'd just exited, and the only separation between ballroom and open air was a tall, cherry wood banister.

When they reached the top of the stairs, the servant ran the bell hanging from the wall and the conversations currently going halted as everyone turned to look.

"The House of Potter, Lord and Lady James Potter and issue."

Used to this, even if he didn't like the excessive formality, Harry gave Nanna his arm and walked her out into the ballroom behind his parents. Nanna whispered under her breath, "We're 'issue'?"

"Hush." Harry scolded, his laughter in his voice. "You've heard it enough at Ministry events."

She sighed lightly, removing her arm from his as Sirius was announced, "Sirius Black, Lord of House Black."

Harry smiled down at Nanna, and glanced around. He didn't get far before Hermione threw herself into his arms, smiling brilliantly. She was in robes Lily had made a point of buying her just for this, baby blue fading to navy in spirals down the aquamarine dress.

"Harry, you look so splendid! I didn't think your family was so important; very few others have been introduced as Lords. Most of them are just "Family" and Slughorn was a "Master", which just sounded odd. Oh, the Lovegoods are here!" She beamed. Harry made an interested noise, and she continued, "Yes, Mr. Lovegood wasn't give a Lord, just a family, and he looked really uncomfortable. Luna was just disappointed Alan wasn't here yet, but she locked onto Blaise pretty easily. Mr. Lovegood went off to hide in a corner or something – Remus, I think, is talking to him – Oh, someone else."

Harry looked shortly before the bell was rung, and couldn't help but smile. It was the Weasleys, looking relatively uncomfortable but at least Alice and Lily had talked Molly into some reasonable dress robes for her family. Molly did not have the most refined taste, focusing on economy before looks, but with Lily and Alice's aid their robes were plain but good looking, and didn't clash with their red hair.

"The House of Weasley, Lord and Lady Arthur Weasley, issue, and their guest, Fleur Delacour."

Harry raised his eyebrows. He hadn't known the Weasleys had any title, and judging by Arthur's startled expression, he hadn't either. He picked himself up admirably, however, and quickly gave Molly his arm, which she gripped tensely. Behind him, the children they'd brought copied them: Bill gave his arm to Fleur with a little bow, Ron to Ginny, and Fred and George snickered and one offered his arm to the other. Naturally, it was accepted. They walked in and joined the crowd, and James quickly walked over to talk with Arthur. Arthur mopped his

brow as he did so and beginning to question him extensively. Alice and Lily did the same to calm down Molly. Ron, seeing Harry talking with Hermione, walked over after Ginny left him for Blaise.

"That was barmy!" He offered, and then the bell rang again. All three of them looked up, and Harry flinched. Oh, that wasn't a face he wanted to see.

"The House of Kozumplik, Lord and Lady Jenner Kozumplik and issue."

Harry tried to hide his reaction, really, and he focused most on Raina refusing to take her brother's arm as they entered. She walked a little behind him, much to his apparent amusement, and split from her family as soon as possible, ignoring her father's irritated look. He softened, however, when she gravitated immediately to Theodore, whispering something in his ear and getting a wry smile out of him. He immediately engaged her in conversation, and Kozumplik and his wife moved to speak with Leopold Nott. Their path took them past Harry and his friends, and Jenner glanced down at him – and grinned.

Harry's skin broke into a cold sweat. He hadn't known the man when it had happened, but he'd gotten a very good look at his face or one quite like it – two, really, which made it a high probability his son had been there as well. Bad light, incoherence ... neither had seen fit to erase the image so he remembered and nearly collapsed, his legs weak. Hermione barely kept him on his feet, and Ron ran to bring Sirius, who was closer than James. Along with Sirius came a man Harry didn't know, but he had a handkerchief and a cup of water. The cool cloth on his forehead helped, and Sirius quickly asked,

"What happened?"

"Nothing." Harry tried. He couldn't really say it; it was a neutral party, and bringing it up would only incense Sirius.

"He met Jenner Kozumplik's eyes and the man grinned." Hermione answered.

Sirius' eyes turned cold and he lifted Harry's chin with a finger. "Harry, did he do anything to you?"

"No." Harry answered, stubbornly insisted he had done nothing – tonight.

Sirius didn't fall for it. "Was he present at your captivity?" He didn't say Voldemort – they didn't need to be name-calling, now.

Harry didn't want to answer, but he couldn't see how not to. "Yeah. I just wasn't certain. You already knew." Sirius looked ready to go, but Harry suddenly felt scared and added, "I think his oldest son was there too." The cold sweat was still on his back, and it almost seemed to sting, even with the wounds long gone. Sirius nodded slowly before removing his hand, and gave Harry a firm look.

"I don't care about propriety in regards to them, Harry. You will walk away any time they try to talk to you, do you hear? If they try to stop you, I want you to make them regret it in anyway you can fathom."

"I can't break neutrality." Harry answered.

"I don't want you to wait for them to break it first." Sirius insisted. "Even if they're just talking to you, I don't want that to happen, alright? Not if you were hurt."

Harry sighed, and then shrugged. "Fine. I'll just fake a screaming breakdown if it doesn't offer itself up. That should get everyone's attention."

The man who had followed Sirius, apparently uncomfortable with the topic and having slipped as far distant as he could, laughed at that. "Oh, that sounds delightfully funny. I can tell you now: you'll at least have all the women on your side. My wife wouldn't be able to leave that alone, and, well, she may not be the most frightening witch but her charms can leave a man squirming on the floor if he doesn't react fast enough. And she's fast."

Harry smiled weakly at him and nodded. Sirius glanced between them, and shrugged.

"Tyler Growman, Harry Potter. Harry, this is Tyler Growman."

Harry smiled and reached out to shake his hand. "Your daughter is Victoria? Faith, as well?"

"Yes." He grinned. "Sirius has told me that apparently his second godchild is good friends with Faith. She's had a lot of very positive things to say about her friendships. I'm glad she's doing so well. Victoria, well..." His face darkened. "She's said she's worried about some of her friends. Raina doesn't look well, and," He glanced around and lowered his voice, not to a whisper but a quieter tone none-the-less, "Victoria's girlfriend, serious girlfriend, hasn't admitted her relationship to her father."

Harry blinked, and quickly called up the glimpses he'd have of Victoria – hadn't she always been with Morgen? They'd seemed very friendly, "Morgen?"

Tyler nodded. "Yes. Her father is a former Minister of Magic –" He was cut off with another bell. Everyone looked up, and to the staircase.

"Master Severus Snape and son. Master Telesphore Quintelyuv."

Harry smirked. Green looked very ticked off; Severus was managing the introduction with his usual sneer. Alan just looked amused. Typical. However, the bell rang again while Alan slipped off in another direction, apparently missing Harry and finding someone else. Harry didn't worry. The ballroom was very crowded, and it was easy to miss someone, especially with how short he was. He tuned into the crier again.

"Family Harper, Mr. And Mrs. Nicholas Harper, issue, and guests."

Harry paid attention; Alan had mentioned that Lucille Alfaerus had married a Nicholas Harper and something in the woman's face did call to mind the Alfaerus clan. More interesting, however, was seeing Sybilla behind them, taking the escort of her younger brother – apparently much younger, as he looked no older than Nanna – with a

certain dignity. Alongside them were Salvador, Dillan, and Tyler. Apparently, as effective minors, they weren't considered for introduction or something, even though Salvador was of majority. Maybe it was a Hodges thing – the Bakers were apparently generally unknown, although how he didn't know.

They had barely dispersed when the bell rang again. A mere glance made Harry feel both elated and worried: the family now present looked distinctly familiar with their curly, dark hair. The patriarch looked no more intimidating than Remus on a bad day, being Neville's height and wearing square silver glasses with his very short ringlets. He was stockier than Neville and had an easy grin. His wife, black-haired, ringlets, and coffee-coloured skin, seemed more outwardly intimidating than him, equal to his height and without glasses.

The crier had to cough before he awkwardly announced, "His Grace, the Magical Duke of Northumbria, Howard Hodges. His Lady, Maxene, and issue."

Howard himself looked up and shook his head, but settled into a wry smile in short order, an expression mirrored by the rest of his family. His son whispered quietly to his sister. A soft, "Ow," made the following motion clear. They walked out, and were followed by others who looked quite like more Hodges, although their hair was a bit less uniformly black. The bell rang once more, although the announcement also hesitated.

"Lord and Lady Erasmus Hodges, and daughter. Lord Jonas Hodges."

As they stepped forward, Sable was standing right behind them, quite too short to take Jonas' arm had he even offered. Harry found himself doubting that he had; Jonas wasn't that nice, not that he had seen.

The Hodges appeared to be the last of that group of introductions, and Sirius and Mr. Growman wandered off. Sirius had seemed quite interested in the Hodges arrival, and excused himself. Hermione asked the ever frustrating question of, "Are you okay?" and Ron took

the pressure off Harry to brush it off. He did not need that question again.

Time seemed to agree with him. They didn't have long to wait before the bell rang again, and this time the tension was simply rolling off the family as they waited.

"The House of Pupp, Lord and Lady Jasper Pupp, and issue."

Harry watched them step out. Lucille, like Raina, had disdained the arm of her older brother who hadn't even bothered offering from what he could tell. Instead, she was walking beside her very subdued younger brother, Grant. Then again, the couple at the front hadn't looked pleased either. They glanced at each other, Jasper bowed, and his wife took herself off in the direction of Leopold Nott. Jasper glanced around the crowds and looked delighted at someone he found in a far corner, moving quickly in that direction. Just as swiftly did Lucille and Grant move to where Harry remembered the Hodges disappearing. The older brother glanced disdainfully around and followed his mother. As he passed, he didn't even look Harry's way. He didn't need to. Harry stomach did a flip-flop on its own accord glimpsing his profile, and quickly Harry straightened and addressed Hermione.

"I'm going to look up Alan. Want to follow?"

Hermione eyed him suspiciously, tracking the older boy's progress before nodding shortly and following as Harry strode through the crowd, Ron tagging along with worry. They encountered the Hodges group before they found Alan, but nearby was a long buffet. Harry, despite his stomach's worried antics, was indeed starving and moved forward without fear and eyed the display with interest. He glanced at the man beside him and asked,

"So, did you check the food here already yourself, or is that just my habit?"

Surprisingly, the man laughed. It was sharp, but reminded him vaguely of the twins. "Nah, I did too, but how do you know I didn't poison it?"

Harry paused in snagging a drumstick and gave him a raised eyebrow. "You are eating it yourself." He couldn't be sure Desdemona had the house elves there, so caution was better...

"Naturally," He returned, grinning, eyes glittering in a caramel face. Harry presumed this would be Howard's son; he was only marginally taller than his father, and their hair was cut just as short, short enough he couldn't tell if he had ringlets. "I would have taken the food before applying the poison or hex. Makes it seem much safer."

Harry turned a wry grin his way before quickly checking the food, as discretely as he could manage. He continued speaking, "Are you one of those working with the Weasley twins? You seem a lot like them."

"No, he's not." A brisk female voice cut in, unhexing the plate Harry had found highlighted in his scan. "He's a menace to society and can't be trusted further than he can be thrown."

"Gwen," The boy whined. "It was a harmless hex."

"I wasn't referring to you hexing the table." The woman returned. She was probably closer to Bill or Charlie in age, Harry supposed, while her brother was a few years younger, making them both in their early twenties. They were arguing like any siblings he knew that were his age. The woman turned her gaze his way, eyes frank brown under a tumble of glossy black ringlets that would probably make Hermione fitfully jealous. Girl's and their hair.

"The food should be pretty much clear, kid."

Harry bristled slightly, and she just grinned. Harry made a show of turning up his nose and then quickly gathered some food together. Apparently Ron had been waiting for him to really start, and the plates around him grew instantly emptier as Ron piled his platter quite full. The man laughed.

"Slow down, Weasley! The plates will be here all night long, yeah?"

Ron glanced up at him, swallowed the bite he'd taken, and grinned. "I'm a growing boy."

He got a frank look-over at that, and a raised eyebrow. "How much further can you grow?" He asked incredulously. "Although you could really use some filling out, you beanpole."

Ron didn't take offence in the slightest. "Precisely."

The hazel eyes danced. "Devlin Hodges, at your service." He bowed low, giving a little flourish and straightening with a bounce. "And I should probably go pester my cousin and his wife. You kids hurry along, hm?" He danced off, acting like half the pranksters Harry knew when they were on the prowl. Harry made a note to keep a wary eye out. Neutrality didn't exclude pranks.

His sister, Gwen, rolled her eyes as he left. "Sometimes that boy is impossible."

"You sound like his mother." Harry commented dryly.

"He needs more than one. Takes a firm hand to keep him from going off and doing something stupid, like, say, clubbing an Auror in the head again."

Harry choked. Gwen gave him another, hard look, and then grimaced.

"Sorry about that, didn't take you for a Potter at first. He was provoked, and the Auror was an ass anyways – Death Eater, in fact. Course, he didn't know it at the time... You know Jonas, don't you?"

Harry nodded carefully, making note of what she was saying. It didn't hurt to keep track of information like this, and listening to James relate his adventures had given Harry a few tricks he remembered of Aurors and their information gathering. The more he learned, the less he trusted the Hodges - no matter how familiar they seemed in the play-by-play. That was just to be expected of most magical families he'd met that lacked the pureblood stick up the ass.

"Well, I'm not sure how much he might mention, but I'm fair sure you can see the similarities."

Harry nodded. "When Filch got the alls clear from Umbridge, Jonas mentioned in one of our meetings that hanging by his ankles wasn't anything new."

Gwen grinned brightly. "Precisely. Nicholas can make any one thing eloquent."

"Nicholas?" Harry asked curiously. "The one in attendance here?"

"Quite." Gwen answered.

Neville cut in, "The same Nicholas Harper who did an essay on Acromantula silk?"

Harry glanced up, and grinned to see his friend present in sheer black robes over a black button down shirt and trousers, with a dark red tie. Gwen raised a short eyebrow.

"Longbottom, right?" She guessed.

Neville raised his eyebrows. "Yes. Do I know you?"

"No. I just recognized your face shape; I've run into your father a few times. I don't know your name."

"Neville Longbottom." He answered giving her a short bow and, when she offered her hand, kissing the back of it gently.

"Great Neville, show us all up why don'tcha?" Harry drawled. "Do you only know me by my dad, too?"

"Not at all." Gwen smirked. "You've been in the paper often enough, it's pretty easy to know you, although not well." Harry grimaced and she nodded slowly. "You do look like you're doing quite well, you know."

Harry gave a wry smile back. “Well, since you know me, I don’t suppose you know Ronald Weasley also?”

“He hasn’t quite the notoriety you have.” She answered giving him a gentle inclination of her head. Ron flushed, and she quickly answered. “No need to be quite so formal as Neville. He’s compensating, I’m sure, for his family’s recent peerage.”

Neville snorted. “Peerage? Please. It’s hardly anything more than fancy titles and a big lump sum in the bank.”

Gwen nodded, flashing white teeth against her own caramel skin. “Indeed it is. I think the main reason we maintain a dukedom is because the monarchs have rather forgotten we exist, especially since they re-established the muggle dukedom of Northumberland. I think my father barely remembers it exists half the time, but apparently Desdemona dredged up all sorts of obscure titles.”

“Probably.” Harry agreed. “So, what was this about Acromantula silk?”

Gwen just laughed.

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Eating and socializing lasted nearly an hour, and Harry gravitated around to talk to various friends and check on his parents many times. Ron, disappointed that Hannah couldn’t make it, stuck with him most of the time, as did Hermione. Neville had been introduced directly to Nicholas Harper by Gwen, much to his surprise, and hadn’t stopped talking since, engaging Sybilla, his daughter, as well.

The ballroom slowly devolved into several groups, from the adults in male and female groups, to Sable’s first years and Melanie, Nanna, and Dillan, plus Russel Harper, who attended Durmstrang like his sister had. Notably, Raina spent most of the evening stuck to Theodore, who was being surprisingly patient in remaining aloof from the rest of the conversations. Harry hadn’t made an attempt to speak to them. They’d stuck to an area he hadn’t entered, simply out of self-preservation: all the present Death Eaters were over there, along with

a group of young men who were boisterous and seemingly already drunk or at least well on their way. There was a buffer of the large group of adult men, which included his father, godfather and Howard Hodges, one he hadn't moved anywhere past, and further along on the same by-line was Bill and Fleur chatting with a man he tentatively identified as Daniel Davis and accompanied by Gwen, Devlin, and Janice Zabini, Blaise's oldest sister. However the drama exploded first on another front: Lucille.

Harry was listening to his father discuss the Ministry's recent blunders – something about the new Minister, which reminded Harry to ask about that as it must have happened while he was out of it over the summer – when Mr. Davis and Mrs. Pupp stalked out from their Death Eater circle and stepped up to where Salvador and Lucille were talking with the twins. They seemed oblivious to the immediate attention they received, not the least of which was every Hodges nearby. Harry could guess how big of a mistake they were about to make. In the far corner, Jasper Pupp glanced up, and then returned to talking with Xenophilius Lovegood, hunching to make himself smaller. It sounded like a good idea to Harry, really. His wife was a harpy, and why they were together escaped him entirely.

"Lucille, come back with me." Lady Pupp ordered. "I do not approve of your flouncing around; you never even came home for Christmas."

"I never said I would." Lucille answered. "I'm of age, mother, and I am not beholden to you anymore."

"I am your mother, and you are not free of me until you are married." She snapped. "Come."

"I am engaged." Lucille bit out. "You can't even complain; he's pureblood and his family was darker than yours."

Emmeline Pupp bristled angrily. "Salvador Hopkins doesn't exist. He was disowned; he is worse than a mudblood."

The temperature in the room must have dropped. The discussion was nowhere near private, and was garnering immediate and complete attention. A motion behind him made Harry jump; he flinched and

glanced back, to find Howard waving James back and moving forward at an easy pace; Harry's father stopped and watched him go intently. Howard came up behind Emmeline without her notice and circled around even as she continued.

"Don't make me force you, Lucille; I will not have this disrespect from my daughter –"

"I notice you seem to be completely ignoring your Gryffindor son." Howard answered easily. Emmeline choked faintly, and turned a withering glare at him. "Perhaps because my little greatniece is standing over him. Have you forgotten the family Salvador Hopkins was adopted into upon his family's failure to get his cooperation?"

Emmeline made a cat-like hiss and turned to glare at Mr. Davis. He had shrunken like a sour lemon, and was clearly going to be no help. Both adults were, if not scared, nervous, which was probably the funniest thing Harry had ever seen because currently, in his blue and gold robes, Howard hardly looked terrifying past his delicate silver glasses, his hands in his pockets and a genial grin. Abruptly, the pleasant façade twisted, his eyes hardened, and his shoulders squared, and Harry abruptly saw why so many people feared a neutral family – and probably why they'd been granted a dukedom so many years ago. This was a man who could scare rebels into compliance.

Apparently it worked on Death Eaters too. Where on earth were they in the first war? He'd seen his father and Sirius do something very similar; heard of it over and over and yet there wasn't even a whisper of the Hodges name in any of the fighting. Wouldn't they have stepped up with the rest of the families on one side or another? Voldemort had never believed in neutrality.

Harry reconsidered that thought; they probably hadn't cared either. They were tucked away in Northumberland, after all. But if he could ask, it would be interesting to know – later. Howard was talking in a deliberately patient voice now.

"Perhaps I should have sent a letter. Salvador would like to marry your daughter. Your daughter agreed. She is of majority; I hadn't

thought it had to be made more clear, but apparently so. Perhaps you haven't noticed, but the curses you wrought to keep your issue in line have been broken. On both children. I'd advise you to return to your sewing circle and forget you ever had a daughter, my dear, and to leave your second son to your husband's care."

Emmeline opened and closed her mouth twice, shut it with a snap and drew her cloak around herself before stalking back across the invisible line, returning to Leopold Nott with a proud, unhurried step. Howard nodded to Salvador and Lucille, pleasant and genial once more, and returned to his group, bringing them abruptly back to the topic of the new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, with a firm look and brisk statement. He ignored James' weighing look that took a moment to melt into pleasant interest once more. Harry listened with half an ear before slipping away to wander, wondering if Gwen would slip out of her group anytime soon. She was the most likely person he imagined would answer his question without eating his liver or selling it back to him for it.

There was a quick, loud note on a violin, and suddenly music drifted out across the dance floor. Harry glanced around, but there was no orchestra; it was likely just a spell or recording. Several people grinned, a few groaned, and Harry spotted Susan standing a little forlornly by her aunt, who laughed and walked to the Ministry group, snagging out Remus and spinning him onto the floor where he quickly grinned and took the lead. Sirius was snagged by Desdemona Zabini, the hostess, and Harry walked to Susan and bowed.

"May I have this dance?"

Susan blushed hotly and nodded. Harry led her out and was a little put off by the swing beat, of all things, but Susan just giggled and helped him remember the steps.

After that dance was over, Daphne came and, surprisingly politely, requested her own dance. Susan gave her a tight look, but acquiesced, and Harry made a note to ask Hermione to dance next; he didn't really want to pick between the two of them any more directly. It was a lot safer when they controlled that little issue. He

was saved the necessity when the next song came on and he could just grin and laugh.

"I'm sorry; my sister always dances with me at this song. Please excuse me." Daphne and Susan, dancing with Russel Harper nearby, laughed appreciatively, and Harry caught Nanna as she ran over, gleefully entering the steps. Dillan smiled on from the distance, and Daphne walked over and joined with him while Susan wandered away in search of a new partner.

They'd been dancing for a good while before Harry begged off the floor from Sybilla – so many girls! He hadn't known that many were attending! – and slipped back to the platters. The food had been exchanged from supper heavy to light snacks, and he gladly took them on a much smaller plate that was laid out, drinking some of the juice and wandering to inspect the selection. He completely unintentionally came across Bill talking with Gwen – who was flirting back.

"-Amazed at how well you've managed; few curse-breakers I've seen hadn't managed two years without getting some really nasty curse permanently etched on them. Are the Weasleys as powerful as you on a regular basis?"

"It's really just good luck and my parents. Fred and George, and my little sister Ginny are all pretty remarkable, and the others aren't weak." Bill sounded mildly uncomfortable, and, at a glance, Harry found him searching the floor, probably for Fleur. Harry wondered if Gwen knew they were attached and then dismissed it. She had to have. Bill would have mentioned it; she'd have seen it, wouldn't she? But then again this was a Hodges - and, before even that, an available young woman. If she didn't care, it wouldn't surprise him on either front.

"You all got that lovely red hair, I see. Me, I get stuck with ringlets. They look pretty and all, but make brushing a tad Hellish. Especially if I get up to anything." She wagged her eyebrows. Bill glanced over the party again, and Harry considered searching out Fleur when the quarter-veela stalked out of the crowd and paused upon seeing Gwen a little closer to Bill than was probably necessary or polite. She

bristled and stalked over, leaning onto Bill immediately with a fawning hand.

“Bill, darling. ‘Ow ‘ave you been ‘ere? We must go find the music and request a proper song.”

“The music is a record.” Gwen pointed out archly. “Although if you ask Lady Zabini, she could probably put a different record on once this one is over.”

“Are you offended because your music is less superior?” Fleur asked in the same venomous tone.

“Of course not.” Gwen smiled. “I need not fear when I already know I am the best.”

Harry snorted. Oh, he knew that tone. Gwen was playing with Fleur, which, while it might still be an honest competition, meant she was at least partly doing it just for the argument. He’d done the same to egg Alan on several times, and he’d seen Alan do it a lot.

Fleur took in her tone and laughed. Several men were distracted and glanced over, including Sirius, and were tugged back to their partners. Bill gazed adoringly at her, and Gwen gave a wry smile before snorting inelegantly.

Fleur glared. “Are you jealous?”

“Of what? Your bleached out natural colour and limp locks?” Gwen shot.

“Ah, of course.” Fleur put her hand dramatically to her chest, breathing deeply. Harry noted it didn’t quite bring her close to Gwen’s own endowments; the veela was just too thin. “You must struggle with that rat’s nest. Perhaps one should be more careful with the perm-charms.”

“And you think I am jealous of you?” Gwen leaned back herself, emphasizing her own chest in turn, which showed nicely against her pale yellow gown that hugged her form under a long, matching

mantle as both darkened to red on the bottom edge. “You don’t have any shape, and neither does your hair while most people wouldn’t notice your name for your appeal.”

“At least I’m engaged.” Fleur spat. “What, can’t keep the boys attention long enough after you tumble them?”

“Insipid harpy!” Gwen spat back.

Harry blinked, and then wandered to the women’s conversation nearby and tapped his mother on the shoulder. When they glanced over, Harry didn’t really say anything and just pointed back over his shoulder. Maxene chuckled and Molly frowned.

“Oh, I didn’t think she’d behave so badly.” She fussed.

Maxene just laughed. “Oh, it’s alright. I’m quite sure Gwen either started it or exacerbated it. Guinevere Claire, cease and desist!” Maxene called. Gwen’s mouth snapped shut; she lifted her nose and dropped her head, curtseying deeply, and then flounced over to her mother. Maxene struggled not to smile as her daughter curtseyed again in her presence, and just shook her head. “Go find your brother, give him a dance, and then attach yourself to someone else. There is no need to be flirting so aggressively with someone engaged. It’s unbecoming.”

“Yes mother.” Gwen answered, turning to leave.

“And nor is it acceptable to pick a fight just to enjoy yourself either, no matter your father’s example!” Her mother added. Gwen turned and stuck out her tongue at that, laughing lightly and skipping off. Maxene shook her head as she turned back to the conversation. “Really, that girl. Thank you, little Potter.”

Harry flushed at the endearment, but just nodded and tried to slip away. His mother stopped him and kissed his forehead. “Harry, thank you. Would you grace your mother with a short dance?”

Harry nodded awkwardly. “Sure,” and led her out.

It reminded him several songs later why he'd left in the first place. He had the strangest popularity while out there, and had been stuck with everyone from Morgen and Victoria to Sable, Ginny, and Hermione. Daphne and Susan, naturally, would snag him on occasion, one after the other, and then he'd beg off with another girl, which didn't tend to be too difficult to accomplish.

Finally, he ended up with Gwen, of all people, who had asked him to dance after Hermione as they came to a slow song Harry knew well. Once he got over her being taller than him, he finally remembered his question and hesitantly asked,

"I don't mean any offence, but what role did the Hodges family have in the first part of the war against Voldemort? There doesn't seem to be any mention of it."

Gwen was silent for a long moment, and then sighed. "You would be curious, wouldn't you?" Harry flushed, extremely nervous, and Gwen just shook her head. "We simply weren't involved. Those who were related to our family – the Bakers, those in the Aurors – fought as they were called, but our family, as it stands, had little to do with it. We're a small family, and everyone had children – I was a child, then, and my father refused to get involved, along with his brother and sister. There was a presence, but my Aunts and Uncles, those who were still fighters at all, weren't enough. Northumberland is well out of the way, so there was rarely a threat to us. We kept the peace in our area, and that was it." She smiled weakly. "Often, in a war, two or three people, no matter how skilled, can only do so much, Harry. My father and his father held family before all other obligations."

Harry ducked his head. "Sorry. I was just curious."

Gwen grinned. "Yeah, I know. My father does look intimidating when he tries, but he's one man with a family to care for." She grimaced. "And nothing of a patriot."

"He looks like a bookworm." Harry offered.

He got a laugh for his trouble. "He was a Ravenclaw, Harry, really. What did you expect?"

Harry shrugged. "You don't have a lot of Slytherins, do you? You're mostly Ravenclaws."

"We have a fair number." Gwen offered. "My brother was a Slytherin, as was I, and Erasmus. But I suppose you could say that we're mostly Ravenclaw, yes. Our mansion has three floors where the entire back room is a large library."

Harry gaped. "That must be bigger than the Hogwarts library!"

Gwen laughed, winked at him, and then slipped away with the end of the song. Harry frowned, but shrugged, and accepted when Melanie begged him for another dance, and the whole parade continued. At one point, he even found himself hauled into a dance with the Weasley twins – naturally, they made him do the girl steps, and he was surrounded by laughter. He didn't mind it – until after some time, he laughed, begged off, and slipped to the table. He was on one of the far sides, near the front sunrooms, and while the invisible line had dissolved upon the dancing, he wasn't aware of the lack of attention his direction until someone spoke up behind him.

"You do dance the girls steps well. Hadn't thought you were so feminine before; I'd have taken a few more liberties while I had the chance."

Harry dropped his glass and jumped back, unfortunately putting his back to the wall. He didn't know the voice, but the tone had said enough. When he turned, he was facing the older sons, and, behind them, Ulyssa Zabini was having a spirited conversation with the Ellsmares, blocking the area off further. He was stuck, and didn't realize one of the two men talking past the young Death Eaters was an adult – not the other young man - until his arms were grabbed, his mouth covered. He nearly fainted he was so scared. They hauled him back, and once they were around the short dividing wall to the sunroom, they waved their accomplice off. Harry watched him go, remembering what he looked like. He didn't have any names, but anyone present was related to someone he did know; the boy reminded him... Wait, he thought it might be Daphne's brother...

One of the young men slammed his fist into the wall beside his head, and Harry flinched into the corner, unable to stop shivering. They both laughed.

"Stupid woman. Neutrality means we can't hurt you, but we had enough of that. You'll just curl into a ball like you did before, and we can enjoy watching you suffer without laying a single hand on you. Did you bring you handkerchief?"

"Someon ..." Harry coughed; his voice was thin and tinny. He couldn't get enough air... "Someone will notice I'm gone."

"Like they noticed oh so quickly you were missing during the attack? Took them about five minutes, if I remember."

"You don't know that!" Harry growled out. He struggled to straighten; he wasn't scared of them. They were just boys. He was scared of the memories, scared of the past. They'd said it themselves; they couldn't hurt him, they could just –

One of them grabbed him and forced his head back. He opened his mouth to scream and had a handkerchief stuffed inside. Harry glared; this was Kozumplik, and a further handkerchief was tied across it to keep him from spitting out the wad of cloth. Kozumplik tapped his cheek and smiled indulgently.

"There. No harm done."

The memory slammed into him like a tidal wave. He was on the cold floor, already coughing blood from the Cruciatus, and the men were milling around him excitedly, anticipating. Voldemort beckoned and two men stepped forward. Harry distantly saw an age gap, a resemblance. More recently did he recognize the voices of his memory. The younger man –Kozumplik- grinned; he licked his lips maliciously and tore his hungry gaze from Harry's bloody form and bowed to Voldemort.

"When do we start?"

"What is going on here?"

Harry looked up from his curl on the floor, barely noticing the tears on his cheeks as the two men turned and blanched. Standing in the open space beyond the short wall was a tall, black-haired man Harry recognized instantly. He started shaking, and crying harder, relief breaking down his inhibitions. He curled tighter into his ball, still scared, and Severus snapped,

"I thought you boys knew the precepts of neutrality."

"We haven't harmed him." Kozumplik drawled lightly. "You've just gone soft since you found your son." He was openly disdainful, disgusted.

"You know nothing of neutrality," Severus snapped again, "and you should remember you have marred your honour by this." He sneered. "Although that's nothing new with the type of lowlife idiots your parents are."

"Shut your mouth!" Pupp growled, barely keeping his voice down. "You disgrace your Mark! You disgrace the Dark Lord!"

"He disgraces himself with his lies." Severus added. "Step away from the Potter boy. Now. Before I bring everyone in and see how far Desdemona will maintain her neutrality in the face of overwhelming stupidity. Leave, now, or leave in the shackles of Aurors. You broke neutrality first."

Both boys were shaken, and stalked out, Pupp pausing and sneering down at Harry before leaving. Reflexively, he curled up tighter, sobbing weakly against the gag. When they were gone, Severus walked to his side and knelt, reaching back to gently untie the cloth as Harry just hadn't thought to do. Once it was gone, Harry reached up and pulled the wadded cloth out, spitting onto the tie and moving to wipe his face with his hand. Severus thrust his own handkerchief in the way.

"At least use this. Don't you have your own?"

"Somewhere." Harry whispered. "I'm just not thinking."

Severus didn't make a remark about it, which probably was quite telling about what kind of state he was in. Harry gently wiped down his face and tried to relax. He felt miserable and betrayed, even as he knew there was only so much declared neutrality could do.

"What were their names?" Harry asked softly. Severus didn't react visibly before answering.

"Thaddeus Pupp and Terrence Kozumplik. They used Horatio Greengrass, Navin Ellsmare and Gregory Davis to provide a smokescreen."

Harry felt bile bitter in his throat. "Ulyssa helped them. So did the older Ellsmares."

"You saw them?"

"Yeah," Harry took a deep breath to try and relax; it didn't help much. "Before they hauled me in here. Has anyone noticed I'm gone yet?"

"It hasn't been even ten minutes." Severus answered tightly. "I grew concerned as Alan said he was looking for you and having trouble finding you. I had seen you over in that area, and when I found such a concentration of the dark families, I felt it worth checking out. Better than anyone else finding you, at least."

Harry laughed quietly. "Yes, there is that." Any of the Marauders would've exploded. "Did they ... did they really break neutrality?"

"Essentially. It was a fine line, but they were being malicious. Would it be breaking neutrality of them to trap Ron in a room full of spiders? Would it be breaking neutrality to haul me back to the Dark Lord? That is the line. They put you in danger, even if it was a danger of your mind, and they did so knowingly and deliberately. Is that not a form of harm?"

"Yes." Harry whispered. "Um, can I sit up somewhere?"

Severus stood and offered Harry his hand. Harry took it, as he doubted his legs were really agreeable at the moment, and let him pull him to his feet and lead him to the soft couches arranged to look out the windows set in the front of the mansion. Harry had been unaware of the Zabini mansion's location, and was surprised to look down on the sea from the edge of the coastline. The soft white waves were very peaceful to look at in the half-light as the sunset, and he slowly stopped shaking, slowly calmed down. Apparently that was what Severus had been waiting for before he quietly asked,

"Why didn't you fight back? They didn't bind you."

Harry froze for a long moment, and then pulled his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. "I ... I didn't think. I could only remember I couldn't fight, because it was neutrality, and I was, I was scared. I was scared of being hurt. I ... I guess I was stupid." He whispered, ashamed. It was stupid. They couldn't have hurt him, but they'd just hauled him around, and he hadn't been able to separate the past and present, only remembering how badly their touch had hurt him before. His skin shivered; that had been when he'd still suffered from the hypersensitive curse. Any touch had been painful then.

"It wasn't stupid, Harry." Severus calmly answered. "You panicked, and with good reason. There's nothing 'stupid' about your reaction."

"It's been months." Harry whispered. "I should be –"

"Do not finish that sentence, Mr. Potter." Severus snapped, his tone brisk and official. Harry's back straightened irritably. This wasn't class! "Trauma such as you experienced has no set limit on the time required to get over it, and no parameters of what should and should not be reactions in the time thereafter. Do you understand me?"

Harry subsided quickly, flinching at the scold – and how true he knew it to be. Severus would know, even if he had never experienced quite the same thing. He'd been Voldemort's servant for years, punished and praised. Harry imagined that was almost worse, in a way. He'd signed up for it. He'd regretted it. Harry was more grateful than anything that he knew why he'd been tortured, and why it had

happened the way it did: someone else had taken his choice from him. He didn't waste his breath blaming himself for anything ... except for his lingering reactions. Softly, Harry started to laugh. Severus let him for several minutes until he spoke up dryly.

"Is something funny?"

"No," Harry answered, wiping the renewed tears away. "Or maybe yes. I'm just thinking, is all. Just a little grateful there isn't any doubt in my mind of what I could or should have done to prevent the damage. I know I was right to be there, to fight, and it was their interference. But I do blame myself for still reacting, for not getting over it. It's ridiculous."

"Oftentimes it is." Severus answered flatly. "You just live with it, and move on. Chances are this party wasn't the greatest idea ever."

"I think it was good." Harry insisted. "Lucille can come clean with her parents. Opinions can be exchanged freely when the families wouldn't otherwise meet. And Raina gets a break from her parents. I think she needs one."

"Sometimes there is nothing you can do for people, Harry." Severus cautiously ventured. Harry merely nodded.

"It won't be perfect for her, but we still can support her." Harry glanced at Severus. "I'd support her no matter what she did to protect herself."

"Even killing herself?"

Harry smiled without humour. "I can sympathize with that. I know Neville can too. I doubt you wouldn't."

Severus paused, then nodded solemnly before he smiled wryly. "On occasion I begin to think you might resemble your father in his less charitable moments, and then abruptly I am reminded that my son told me you should have been Slytherin, and the hat does not lie. And I know it didn't there."

Harry ducked his head and curled up. "Anyone who gets tortured would want to die eventually."

"But would they remember it without shame once they were free?"

Harry blinked at him. "Why would they be ashamed? They couldn't fight it. Sometimes that's the only way."

"You are still young, Harry." Severus shook his head slowly. He ignored the glower he was getting and stood. He glanced across the room and waved shortly. Not a minute later, Alan jogged in and stared. Neville, behind him, passed and walked by Severus to sit next to him. Harry smiled and leaned against his brother, waving tiredly as Severus left.

"Harry, what happened? Are you alright?" Alan asked briskly.

Harry just waved his hand tiredly at him. "I'm fine now. It's alright, it's not like we can do anything about it right now."

"Like Hell we can't." Alan and Neville said in synch. Neville shook his head. "Harry, have you forgotten who's in attendance? The twins? We can't tell the Marauders, but the twins can run those boys ragged without breaking neutrality any further than they did. No harm done."

Harry didn't even speak up; happy to just be with his friends and to let them defend him. He'd get pissed when he didn't feel so broken.

After a period of half-an-hour, Neville poked Harry awake. Harry blinked, noticing the waves were hidden in a mantle of black – not that they'd been easy to see before, anyways – and there was irate yelling and strained laughter coming from the ballroom. Harry stood up, his legs surprisingly not buckling under him in protest, and watched Neville exaggerate stretching himself and his shoulder out before walking with him back into the ballroom. They found the room was in a bit of disarray, as several people were currently swearing, storming around, and turning to glare at each other. Harry checked the time and felt grateful it was about time for the party to wind down anyways: this didn't look like it would too fun for much longer. They found a grouping with James and Lily, and his mother, who noticed

he'd been upset with uncanny swiftness, immediately set upon Harry. After glancing up again, however, she didn't mention it and pushed James aside so Harry and Neville could see the source of the chaos without blockage. Harry felt immediately curious and vindicated: curious was for what on earth had happened, vindicated because it looked messy. After several more minutes of squabbling, Desdemona Zabini shot off effective gunshot sounds with her wand and garnered grudging silence.

"Ulyssa!" She demanded. "What happened?"

A black-haired man with uniformly scarlet skin and an ill-fitting set of women's dress robes stepped forward with a scowl. His voice was tinny and quiet. "I don't know mother, but I want this reversed! What's going on?"

Someone started scratching away with a quill nearby. Harry glanced over at the twins, and found them eyeing the group of discomfited wizards and speaking to each other in low voices. Harry turned back to the group and grinned. When wouldn't the twins gladly test a project on a set of predetermined subjects who nobody will really mind experiencing unfortunate side effects? Well, nobody who mattered, at any rate.

A younger lady suddenly squealed like a pig, and then started fussing nervously with her too-large men's robes. She panted out, "Oh no, oh no." Several people turned to her and she turned scarlet – a feat with her bright pink skin and hair, and then settled, twitching nervously, her legs tightly pressed together, and her arms over her belly. She looked mildly ill. The twins made more, quick notes, and Desdemona shook her head to her daughter's inquiry, eyeing the squealing girl with what looked like malice in her eyes.

"I suspect, my daughter, you are getting the results of your actions earlier."

"But why just us? What did we – You!" The anger was wasted on the tinny, quiet voice, but the look in her eyes – well, his – made the anger clear. "You set us up!"

"I?" Desdemona asked carefully, and then turned her gaze over the gathered, brightly coloured, wizards. Harry recognized Kozumplik and his father's now over-large robes, and Pupp and his mother as well alongside the Ellsmares, their son, and Gregory Davis. All by their robes, really, as they'd all had their gender reversed. And only them. "You did this to yourselves. After all, you were stupid enough not to check the drinks I'd given you. They were stupid enough not to check either. But I suppose since you've already worked with them to undermine others, you're one of theirs, aren't you?"

Ulyssa gulped, taken aback. Desdemona pitched her voice through the room. "I'm sorry, but for the sanctity of neutrality, I declare the party over once I am done explaining why. None of you are to make any motion against another this evening; upon the morrow, any slights technically should be declared forgotten, however," She turned blandly back to her daughter, "I forgot to factor in the overwhelming ignorance and arrogance of youth. My honour has been marred by my daughter; I hope she finds a new home soon, as she has no place in mine."

James reflexively reached forward and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry was grateful; he felt like he was going to faint. That was a little extreme, but, in a way, it made sense. Ms. Zabini had been making a lot of motions for the Order, and she wasn't known as a tolerant woman. She didn't do half-measures, not with seven dead husbands in her past. To some people, family was not sacred in the least.

"Thaddeus Pupp and Terrence Kozumplik took action against the Potter heir." Mrs. Zabini continued. James' hand suddenly tightened painfully. "In full knowledge of their past history, and the scars remaining, they terrorized him under neutrality and gagged him to prevent his own defence as he held to the declaration. It was reported to me by Severus Snape, for which I am grateful he stepped in. I declare the retaliation fully earned, and send them from my home." She stepped back, leaving the way to the stairwell open. "Leave." She growled.

Leopold Nott straightened his small, wiry female body and glared. "How dare you threw me out of your house! I have done nothing to warrant it –"

"I declare you aiding and abetting." She snapped. "And it is my choice, Leopold. You will leave within ten minutes, or I will have Aurors escort you from the premises and where they take you after that is none of my concern." She turned to find Theodore, who was completely unpranked for having spent the evening with Raina, dodging people and questions and essentially remaining the spirit of neutrality, taking neither side. "My apologies, Theodore. I see you had no association, but with your father you must go. You are welcome to return on your own at a later time. Raina, I have seen no harm in your presence here. You may return as well."

Theodore nodded, thanked her politely and left with more dignity than his father managed. Raina looked pale, but followed in her family's wake without acknowledging Desdemona's offer. With Leopold's departure, the rest of the Dark families trickled out as well, Desdemona singling out those who were 'Blaise's' friends and apologizing and renewing their invitation. With the Pupp's, she stopped Emmeline where she stood and pulled her back over with a cruel smile.

"Emmeline, for your part I give you this." She pulled Ulyssa over and placed her hand in Emmeline's. Both women, currently men, started stuttering. Desdemona spoke over them. "I know you are recently bereft of a daughter, so I give you mine." Her face hardened, and she turned to a growl again. "May you never, neither of you, darken my doorstep again. Get out of my house." She dropped their hands like a plague and pointed them down the stairs. Grant hesitantly followed behind, but Howard stopped him and handed him a necklace, whispering in his ear. He brightened slightly and jogged after them, catching up with his father who shot a grateful look at the Hodges patriarch.

After the families in disgrace left, Stephanie's parents glared at Desdemona and announced they were leaving as well, followed by the Thatass family. Desdemona expressed her regrets over the bad

ending, and gave them a curtsey and an open invite to contact her again.

Once they were all gone, Desdemona turned and gave a deep curtsey to James and Lily. Harry squirmed in front of them, awkward.

“Please forgive me. The breach is a stain on my honour, and I should have been more vigilant. I hope no lasting harm has been done.”

James glanced down at Harry and back up at her. “I do not hold you responsible. As you said, there is no way to counter the overwhelming ignorance and arrogance of youth. The young men who acted were the ones at fault.”

Apparently neither of them was going to mention the slight folly of putting Aurors – Order members, even – on the same dance floor as Death Eaters. Harry shrugged and glanced aside. Mrs. Zabini gave another curtsey.

“I’m very sorry you were hurt, Harry.”

“I’ll be fine.” Harry answered immediately, flushed slightly. “I … I thank you for your concern, though, and defence.”

Desdemona Zabini nodded, smiled faintly, and sighed. “I do believe any festivity that remains will not hold up very well. Please, mingle at will, but the party should wind down in a half hour or so. Thank you all very much for coming.”

There were murmurs of thanks and commiseration, and swiftly the Order gathered around Harry to ensure he was all right. He thanked them, and eventually ducked behind his mother to get the picture across that he was feeling overwhelmed. Sticking out his tongue at them from behind her back resulted in a cascade of laughter. The prank was discussed, its short-lived nature, the effects, who to contact for more information on the effects, and so on, but they didn’t stick around very long at all; when the Potters left, everyone followed them.

A/N: Quick morning update before work! Enjoy, please don't be too horrified at the fat in this.

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-seven

Harry was feeling a lot better the next day, and his head felt amazingly clear despite the vivid nightmare the night before. He must be getting used to them; whether this was a good or bad thing remained to be seen. They at least no longer left him so tired, and no longer came every night. He wasn't sure if the problem the night of the party would make them worse or not. He would survive though - he was determined to.

However, the party took its toll on several others. Aside from Desdemona estranging her daughter, the next evening James came home looking drawn and concerned. Harry glanced up as he threw himself into his chair with a heavy sigh and Lily handed him his supper, undoing the warming charm with a single motion.

"What is it today, James?"

He shot one concerned glance at Nanna but didn't push after she glared back.

"Vadim Kozumplik and his mother both went to St. Mungos, poisoned. They said it was taken care of, and no investigation need happen. They attributed it to the food last night, even though nobody else got sick. However," He leaned forward on his arms, and Harry listened intently again; he'd gotten the sinking feeling Raina wasn't doing well at all and he doubted it had to do with poison, "someone else did go home apparently drunk enough to not notice a house elf," He added sceptically, "misplaced a bottle of kerosene with his nightcap. Drank the whole thing. Dead within twenty minutes; wasn't found till morning."

"Who was it?" Harry asked, curious. He hadn't thought too many people were drunk.

James watched him as he answered, "Leopold Nott."

Harry blinked. "Oh." He offered, startled but not surprised.

"Does it?" James asked, curious. "I would like to know why, off the record. We're not too concerned; whoever offed him did us a favour, as he's got the Dark Mark, so there won't be a prosecution." He grinned weakly. "We certainly don't have the manpower to bother with someone we're worried about fighting in the first place."

Harry turned back to his meal and pushed his food around idly. He did know where his father was coming from in asking, but he wasn't sure Theodore would want to be talked about. He'd never been very close to their group. Harry finally hedged on a short and concise phrase. "Nott didn't like his father. His father was cold and merciless. Theodore learned well from him. He ... I think the pressure started getting to him in the last year or so. He wasn't much like this in fourth year; I think he was still ... still a little innocent then. But he's gotten a lot ... colder." Harry shook his head. "Theodore may be scary, but he's made his decision and he sides with Alan. Leopold was old and probably wanted Theodore to step up and take the Mark, and his place in the circle. Theodore refuses to tie himself to someone as a servant. I think ... never mind." Harry shrugged it off. "I really shouldn't continue."

"Killing his father would be an expedient way to prevent that?"

Harry didn't answer and returned to eating. James was silent for a moment, and then answered, "Thank you. For telling me what you did, Harry."

Harry just shrugged, but he smiled slightly and straightened back to proper posture.

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The return to Hogwarts was the same as it was every year, and Harry was feeling surprisingly positive about the matter. It might have helped that he'd had nightmares only three nights in a row after the party and then they'd returned to the vagueness he had grown accustomed to throughout early December. He rarely needed even a half-dose of Dreamless Sleep.

Classes were once again full and thorough; homework choked them, and Quidditch practice got marginalized; several times, Harry assigned Ron to take the new team out while he finished up some homework. Potions, surprisingly, was the current headache. Green had pulled out some Golpalott's Law and was systematically torturing them with it until they all understood and could make some kind of step towards succeeding. Even looking at the essays required made his eyes cross.

The only good thing he found happening was Arithmancy steadily beginning to make more sense. Something had just clicked, and the work got easier, smoother. He nearly cried out for joy when he found himself finishing an essay and having Lucille glance through it – they often checked each others work during library study sessions – and she tossed it down and asked him why he wanted someone else to look it over – it was perfect. With that occurring towards the middle of the month, and the Golpalott segment of Potions ending, Harry nearly sighed with relief.

Apparently that just wasn't kosher, though. Something had to go wrong.

And naturally, it had to be spectacular.

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Dinner.

The time of the Gods.

Then again, it was Neville's own damn fault he was taking so many classes that dinner felt so utterly relaxing. Harry was now snickering at him.

"Oh, hush. The only reason your schedule isn't as scary as mine is because you're not taking Ancient Runes."

"Yeah, but really Neville," Harry returned, grinning. "You're still the one who signed up for all of it."

Neville delicately chose several words his grandmother would have boxed his ears for, and then sat up properly, yawned, and dug in. He had to stop himself from glancing to his left. Hermione was sitting next to him again, finally, and while they didn't talk much, they were certainly on decent terms. And it was very distracting in the most pleasant of ways to be near her again. After losing that delight to fear a year ago Neville had been quietly ecstatic to find the nervousness fading, so much so he wasn't in any hurry to press for more. He just enjoyed the company in and of itself.

Several minutes later, Melanie pulled up the seat nearby and started on her own meal, followed by Nanna, who was looking forlornly at the Slytherin table. Neville snickered as Harry noticed and frowned worriedly. He knew what he was thinking: Nanna wished she were sitting with Dillan, and Harry wasn't sure he liked his little sister growing up. Not that Neville could talk. Melanie hadn't found an interest yet, although she had apparently found a quill friend he should probably ask about...

Neither Grant nor Tyler was sitting at the Gryffindor table. Both of them tended to gravitate to Ravenclaw, where Sable held 'court' with her Slytherin friends and Connor. They'd been immediately taken with the idea in the beginning of the year when Neville and Harry had joined Alan at his table. Flitwick had noticed and went to talk to them to state the rules: Sharing tables was only allowed during casual meals. On special occasions, students were required to remain within their house.

About fifteen minutes after Melanie had sat down, someone started to raise their voice across the Hall. Students quickly looked up – and a blast echoed across the Hall. Someone was thrown from their seat across the Slytherin table and Neville watched Alan surge to his feet, free from the benches. The rest of the coterie scattered outwards, on their feet, wands raised – and as far as Neville could tell, they were raised against Alan. Someone shouted, voice distorted,

"What the Hell is going on, Alan?"

"That's not Alan!" Neville recognized that cold, tight voice; it was Theodore. "Is it, my Lord?"

Alan started to laugh, and Neville's hackles tried to crawl off his neck. Alan didn't laugh like that, cold and derisive. His voice was usually warm, mocking sometimes, but playful, teasing. Not cold. Never cold.

The staff table had drawn their wands now, and when Neville glanced up, Dumbledore nodded to him and looked pointedly at the table – it had cleared. Neville got to his feet and called,

"Hermione, move." He didn't look for Harry; he was already gone, "Ron, get the students under shields of whatever can be raised. Hurry!"

Ron blinked at being given an order, but he took it and moved to holler to the other students. It wasn't fast enough: Alan, or the Dark Lord, had started throwing spells. Salvador screamed; Lucille threw something, and the scream lowered, but didn't stop. Harry had jumped up the Hufflepuff table, where the middle was clearing out to either end of the Hall, when more screams were followed by a loud, final thud.

Neville knew before he looked that they were trapped in the Hall.

Quicker than he had any right to be casting, another spell ripped through Alan's coterie and children screamed; a table exploded and Neville reflexively raised a shield that was soon peppered with splinters and at least one inkpot. He didn't look around; the screaming had become stereo – it was all around him, and he only knew that more would come if something didn't stop the massacre. Further ahead, behind the staff table – the air exploded in noise, and a ball of fire splattered against the hangings on the opposite side of the wall, dropping onto the crowd below where students frantically brought out water and shields, teacher's moving amongst them, working to clear the chaos. Neville was over Ravenclaw, and abruptly jumped back over the table as Harry snarled,

"Tom fucking Riddle, leave my friend alone!"

Alan's coterie backed off, leaving the circle open as Harry cast, the spell missing for no apparent reason - but it exploded into a large

burst of purple light that snagged his opponent's wrist. Alan – Voldemort – shrieked and staggered backwards, glaring up at Harry. His eyes were burning red. Blood red eyes in Alan's furious face.

"You'll have to force me." Alan's mouth snarled, but it wasn't his voice, it was too twisted, distorted with a stranger's alien tone. "Remember, your dear friend has to come back here. I'm not really here."

Harry scoffed and turned to face him side on, wand raised high. "I will always defy you. I can duel without worries; Alan will heal."

"Will he?"

Neville was glad Alan didn't grin like that on a regular basis, because that was freaking scary. Neville backed up again, and then stood on the other side of the Ravenclaw table and prepared, casting one spell he knew would keep this duel self contained – Franklin's Explosion Barrier, which he'd talked Alan into teaching him during last year. It arced in front of Alan's coterie and sealed off that section of the room under a dome pressed against the far wall. Neville immediately began to sweat and staggered. The spell almost snapped out of his control before someone guided him to sit on the bench. He glanced up and nearly lost the spell again when he looked at Hermione.

"Keep focused, Neville. We need that barrier."

He could only nod wordlessly; spells were hitting the barrier regularly now, spells that were stronger than Harry or Alan had thrown at his barrier to test him before. Neville couldn't stop his curiosity and turned to look at the terrific fight going on behind his barrier; he certainly wasn't alone.

Harry's wand was blazing, and he dodged better than he thought anyone could expect, powerful leaps as his spells flew in shining arcs, mainly landing on the wall behind the Dark Lord. The range was so wide and moving so fast, he couldn't begin to guess what spells he was using. Neville hated to admit it, but Alan also looked majestic, despite the red eyes as he returned fire, spells large and powerful – he was using brute force, not finesse, at least not right now. Alan's reserves were more than up to the task, his tall, lean body skipping

aside in perfect imitation of Harry – a grave misfortune as if he could only be knocked out ... but what would do any good? Knocking him out wouldn't guarantee the Dark Lord was gone. How the Hell had it even happened? Alan's Occlumency was excellent. Admittedly, he'd certainly suffered a few problems before but it had usually been a lack of sleep or a serious distraction or weakness. Neville had seen him not half an hour ago ... maybe forty-five minutes, now, time was stretching a little. But he hadn't been at all tired.

Two blasts hit at the same time. Neville's vision wavered and he braced himself on the table. The Dark Lord had manoeuvred Harry so his spells hit the shield as well, putting further strain on Neville. It didn't hurt, per se ... but it wasn't comfortable, and it was manifesting rapidly as a pounding headache.

It was through the headache that he felt the disturbance; the headache eased momentarily. He looked up quickly in time with a sudden lapse; the spells slowed, halted, their power dwindling rapidly. Inside the shield, a small silver kneazle stalked quickly over to Alan and meowed silently, demandingly.

Neville didn't know anyone with a kneazle Patronus, but apparently Alan did.

Wait-a-minute.

Luna walked over and climbed up on the Ravenclaw table, her wand held negligently in her hand. She smiled dreamily at Neville and glanced at the barrier. Neville mimed a rune in the air, and Luna quickly sketched it and walked through. Neville watched her, wondering at her nonchalance, her complete lack of fear – and the very probable fact that the Patronus was hers. Neville stared blindly and abruptly realized that Alan was watching her come with a terrified face – and dark red eyes, eyes that were no longer glowing, but flickering fitfully. Harry was leaning against the blackened scarred wood of the Slytherin table, panting and exhausted. Neville glanced worriedly at Hermione, and then back inside.

If this didn't work, Alan would break, even if they woke him up. He wouldn't survive if Voldemort killed his best friend and lover through him as proxy.

Luna apparently didn't care. She walked straight over to him and reached up with both hands, pulling Alan's face down to hers in a gentle, tentative kiss. It held for five seconds; Neville didn't think he drew breath, until Alan suddenly slumped against her, his knees giving out as Luna lowered him gently to the floor. Neville broke the barrier immediately and struggled to get up. Hermione grabbed his arm and helped him, swearing,

"Stubborn, mule-headed brat, but I know you won't give up, so by God help me get you up."

Neville could only laugh, staggering on weak legs and stepping up and over the Ravenclaw table to clamber over the Slytherin as well and gently tap Harry's face. His brother was already unconscious.

At the far end of the Hall, the doors swung slowly open, and several Aurors swarmed in, followed by Medi wizards levitating stacked stretchers. Dumbledore called to them immediately.

"The threat is neutralized. Please aid the Medi wizards in retrieving the injured students. I will come with you shortly to explain what happened."

A few of the group dispersed after the Medi wizards; two stalked up the aisle with business on their faces, and two ran to Neville's side. Neville reached up immediately and hugged his mother, as Frank glanced around in concern.

"What happened?"

Neville swallowed and shook his head. "I think Dumbledore's got a reason to be discrete about it. Harry and Alan need to go to the hospital wing; Alan..." Neville bit his lip. "Check with Dumbledore about Alan."

Well, Neville quickly revised his opinion about saying anything. Just mentioning extra precaution with Alan just about screamed problem with Voldemort, and neither of his parents were going to miss the conclusion of possession, not with what the Order knew. At least he presumed that's what they thought. If they started just thinking his mind was corrupted, that was probably worse than possession. Fortunately only the Order was really confident about Alan's connection with Voldemort; the ministry had only a vague idea about it and thus their conclusion would be delayed and possibly non-existent.

The matter settled as Dumbledore led the two Aurors back down, conjuring stretchers for Harry and Alan, and one more. Neville blushed when Dumbledore gave him a pointed look.

"I really can walk, honest." Neville argued.

Hermione made a noise like an angry cat. "You couldn't stand without aid. You held a shield against two wizards twice your strength for almost ten minutes. You will sit down on that stretcher and not argue."

Neville stared and wondered when Hermione had gotten scary. And why on earth he was having the completely opposite reaction he probably should be. Mostly to hide the unwelcome response, Neville gave in and rolled onto the stretcher, lying on his side, one leg bent and trying to look composed and regal as though he were being escorted somewhere special – not hauled to the hospital wing. His parents were snickering, and Neville had the sneaking suspicion his father was aware of what all the show was for. Dammit, couldn't he have warned him that getting scolded could turn him on? Then again, he'd gotten turned on by just watching her ... Poking her in the side and getting swatted ... Getting an accidental mouthful of hair ... Okay, apparently just about anything worked for a teenager. He was just grateful that robes did a pretty good job of hiding random erections.

When they arrived at the hospital wing, the little problem had died down quite effectively. Students were already up there, and Dumbledore had a short, whispered conversation with Pomfrey

before she led them to the far end and through it into a private room. She expanded it slightly and brought up a third bed before snagging Neville's stretcher and turning him, hovering him over the bed the right way around and laying him down on it before vanishing the conjured stretcher. She glared at him, and barked,

"You will stay there!"

Dumbledore had left the Aurors out in the main ward, and placed Alan's stretcher on the far bed, Harry on the bed in the middle. Pomfrey looked at them both and hissed. "Dumbledore, Severus will need to do the majority of the work on Harry. More than half of these spells are Dark Arts."

"Do what you can to keep him stable," Dumbledore nodded quickly, "and then please care for Alan. You should be able to heal him with little trouble. I will fetch Severus. And Pomfrey, you will allow Luna Lovegood to remain in here at all times until I say otherwise. I will send her up the moment I find her."

Pomfrey admirably didn't argue, and turned quickly to sift through the spells still affecting Harry. She growled and Neville abruptly could read some of the signatures she was looking for – she'd shifted just out of the way, and was using a powerful spell with a visible effect. Neville frowned.

"That one's the Dark pain curse, three steps down from the Cruciatus. The counter is a down-sweep and incantation, 'Nix algeon'" Neville recited. "The one you looked at before it was some kind of nerve deadener, possibly the Yall'n di'on Chord spell. I can't remember the counter at the moment..."

Pomfrey frowned at him, and tried to counter he'd given her. The spell struggled, but Pomfrey glared and it gave way. She frowned back at Neville again. "How do you know this?"

Neville shrugged. "I read too much and indiscriminately. And remember too much of it, too."

Pomfrey frowned, and then hesitated before turning from Harry. "If you can find a few more spells you can counter, I would feel much obliged. When Severus arrives, please tell him everything you found out. If you feel like you're going to faint, get back to your bed immediately. You are only exhausted and will probably sleep a few days through, but I can't in good conscience leave him when you aren't in dangerous territory yet and you can help."

She turned away and Neville frowned before getting out of the bed and glancing at the traces he could see on Harry. There were a lot of spells, mostly minor pain curses, nerve problems, and a few cracked bones. Harry had done a phenomenal job of avoiding anything major, even as a small number cracked through hasty shields and left token marks upon him. Others he had somehow found time and energy to counter himself, some hastily and messily, and others efficiently. Every time a spell touched him, though, it left a mark and the patchwork was frustrating to work through. Neville managed to identify and remove four curses, and identify several others he didn't know the counter to before Severus came storming in, Luna on his heels. Pomfrey glanced up, pointed Luna to a chair and Severus to Harry's bed. Neville stepped back, feeling shaky and wanting to lie down and go to sleep immediately, but he needed to tell Snape what he'd found.

When he met Severus' eyes, he found them surprisingly soft as his teacher caught his shoulder and chin in a gentle grip.

"Neville, let me in your shields and I'll find the information before I lay you into bed, please?"

The please did it. Neville dropped his solid Crystal wall and Severus gently sifted through his recent memories, apparently understanding more than Neville had, and Neville wasn't aware of when he slipped out; he didn't even feel his legs just folding beneath him as he slipped unconscious.

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Alan awoke before Harry or Neville did, to find Luna lying across his body, the separation of the blankets between them. He felt infinitely

peaceful and just sighed in contentment for a long moment. He didn't know how long he was half awake before Pomfrey came in, but she saw him and sighed, walking to a table set just inside the door and picking up a potion she handed to him.

"Your father and the Headmaster agree you need to drink this for now. Please, do so."

Alan blinked. "What is it?"

"It's a calming potion." Pomfrey sighed. "You're not going to like the news to come, and we need to keep you stable."

Alan took the potion, sniffed it, eyed the consistency and colour before taking a sip to test taste and then downing it. Nope. No meddling. Why just a calming potion, then, if they seemed so cautious? Alan dismissed it to wait for the answer, giving Luna a soft, affectionate glance. She hadn't stirred despite him sitting up, or if she had she hadn't decided to do anything about it. She'd likely get it all out of him later on anyways.

"So. Calm now." Alan smiled. "What's the terrible news and why am I in a private room with only Harry and Neville, with Luna on my bed? Not that I mind."

Pomfrey sighed and shook her head. "What do you remember last, Alan?"

Alan frowned and thought. "We had Charms. We went down to supper. Someone had filled my cup with grape juice rather than Pumpkin... I had pork chops, but ... I got a headache ..."

Alan considered his words and what happened next. It wasn't poison; that wouldn't have affected him. The grape juice had tasted stronger than he remembered it, and usually the goblets were full of pumpkin juice if they had anything in them. He'd immediately taken the cup when he sat down. He didn't do that. But his scan ... he hadn't scanned. That didn't happen. He hadn't seen a spell though, nowhere. His memories weren't adding up.

"Something's wrong." Alan observed. "I don't remember anything."

"I was afraid of that." Pomfrey admitted. "Although I would have been more disturbed if you had. Please wait; I need to fetch your father and Dumbledore. Stay in your bed."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey." Like Hell would he move with a memory gap like that.

What did he know? Something had compelled him to drink from his goblet immediately. Without waiting, without checking. He'd checked his food though, right? No? No. But he was sure the goblet was at fault, or at least started it. Pork chops. Potatoes. Gravy. Broccoli. Normal. He rarely checked broccoli anyways. Nobody liked it unless there was cheese sauce, so it wasn't usually in the area in the first place.

He was getting off track. He couldn't remember eating much, but Blaise had asked him something eventually. He didn't recall his answer, but Blaise's tone had changed. He'd gotten suspicious. Something had been wrong, and Blaise knew him well enough to know it. Thank God. Someone had caught on. If that had gone unchecked...

Alan rubbed his temples and fought with his mind. He found a spot of panic, and dove at it, determined to find out,

Spell, cast, gone; Blaise was thrown backwards, across the table, scattering the platters and terrorizing the students.

"STOP IT!" Alan shrieked at himself, no sound coming out of his mouth. "LEAVE MY FRIENDS ALONE!"

'There's no need to worry,' a cold voice slithered down his spine, 'you'll be in one piece at the end; none of these can stand against me.'

Alan felt someone's hand on his cheek and he glanced down at Luna's large blinking eyes. She was eyeing his face carefully and then pulled herself up to kiss his cheek.

"Stop dwelling on it." She offered dreamily. "It won't happen again."

"Luna..." Alan swallowed hard against his dry throat. "I..."

"Are you remembering a bit now, Alan?"

Alan glanced up quickly at Dumbledore, flicking his eyes to take in Severus behind him, and then nodded cautiously. "Yes. I ... I threw Blaise down the table. I ... I sort have remembered that. Remembered it being done, but I wasn't doing it. I wasn't in control. I... Voldemort possessed me?" Alan hated his voice as it turned weak and soft in the end, but dammit, he was scared shitless.

"He did, Alan." Dumbledore nodded gravely. "The Great Hall was attacked during dinner time. You have slept sixteen hours already; it is noon, the day after. The school is on hiatus for a few days, due to the large number of students injured."

I did that.

No, it was Voldemort.

He used me, though.

"I'm sorry." Alan whispered. He yelped as Luna pinched him. "Luna, what was that for!"

"Stupidity." Luna answered playfully. "Caused by the vibes of a Grinner. Pinches disrupt the tune, so you can get over it."

Alan opened his mouth, figured he wouldn't get anywhere arguing with her and turned back to Dumbledore and Severus. "What happened? How... How bad was it?"

"Not as bad as it could have been." Dumbledore assured him. "Blaise realized the problem quickly; he will survive the fall with little ill effect; it was almost beneficial he was immediately knocked out; he suffered less damage than some who stood against you."

"Harry." Alan choked on the name.

"He will recover fully in a few days." Dumbledore nodded. "Neville exhausted himself holding a shield to contain your fight."

Alan turned dead eyes to him. "They were at the Gryffindor table. They had to get across. What happened in the meantime?"

"Do you mean, did anybody die?" Dumbledore asked softly. Alan's throat closed. "We lost three students. Megan Jones, a Hufflepuff. Ackerly Stuart, a Ravenclaw, and Catrin Vance. I ... believe you knew her, in passing. Several others are still critical, but hope remains strong for their full recovery."

Alan looked down at his hands and struggled with his horror and fear. He'd killed. It wasn't the first time; it wasn't even the only accident that had done so. But ... he shouldn't have collapsed. His Occlumency... "Why didn't my Occlumency work?"

"We found traces of a foreign potion in your system." Severus responded. "I haven't finished analyzing it yet, but it seems to have dissolved your shields completely and quickly. I... Normally you would have noticed." Severus finished oddly, "however, I expect you were distracted. Do you believe so?"

"I didn't see any spells." Alan answered dully. "But ... but when I sat down, I ... I immediately grabbed my goblet and it was already full of grape juice. I ... don't know why it didn't seem odd. I didn't scan anything as I ate. And ... and slowly I can't remember. I don't remember eating much. I can vaguely remember Blaise asking me something, but I don't remember responding. He returned it ... and he was immediately suspicious. I could hear that in his voice. And the next thing I can recall is Blaise being blasted away and screaming for him, for Voldemort, to leave my friends alone. It was only in my mind though; I couldn't speak. And he just told me ... something. I can't remember. I can't remember anything." He looked at Dumbledore and his father pleadingly. He didn't know where his trembling started or ended.

"It's not unprecedented." Dumbledore answered. "You fought yourself dead tired, both by Voldemort's exploitation of your magical reserves and in your own mental battle. It is a natural response to such an exhaustive encounter for your memories to have been forgotten. They may have never even formed in the first place."

"What happened? What stopped him?" Alan asked dully. "Did Harry duel me into submission?"

"Harry never duelled you, Alan." Dumbledore snapped. "You were not present during that fight." Alan glanced up to argue and Dumbledore cut him off. "Do not blame yourself for the actions of your enemy, no matter how he may use you. You had no part in his actions, and no fault. I will double-check the Great Hall, but have you ever gazed upon the floor beneath the tables with your sight?"

Alan blinked. "I can't see down there. How would I have?"

"Do you remember the third task of the Triwizard Tournament at all, Alan?" Dumbledore scolded.

Alan growled, "Yes, I think I'll remember that the rest of my life."

"The maze, Alan, do you remember the maze and the traps that would have been so utterly daunting and exhausting to the other Champions, ones you got a free ride through on your own skill?"

Alan paused. "The spell squares on the ground?" He asked cautiously.

"If the level of talent displayed by the one who has threatened your life through most of the first term is any guess, a spell plate such as that would be easily placed under your usual seat at the Slytherin table."

Alan swallowed. Okay. Plan B: Start alternating sitting arrangements. He should have noticed he was getting into a habit. "Alright." Alan caved. "I'm sorry –for being foolish about blaming myself." Alan quickly amended as Luna moved to pinch him again. "Good grief girl."

Luna sniffled. "Have some kindness for the girl who saved your life."

"You saved me?" Alan asked incredulously. "How?"

Dumbledore chuckled softly. "I do believe that is something I am also curious about. All I saw was Ms. Lovegood casting her Patronus and sending it through the barrier, and then walking after. I'm sorry to say the distortion of the shield prevented a good view, but I do believe she kissed you. And while I understand the principles behind it, I do not believe I expected such a reaction – foolish of me, indeed, but after our last conversation it was a fear of mine."

"Er." Alan wasn't sure how to answer. "Luna, why would your hare get a response like that?"

Luna beamed at him, and Dumbledore quietly said, "It wasn't a hare—" before Luna quickly, and silently (Alan felt a rush of misplaced pride she had mastered the skill) cast her patronus. Alan gaped as it formed, and felt himself abruptly blush crimson as he realized exactly what memory – or memories – she was using.

"Luna!" He hissed.

"What?" She asked innocently. Dumbledore and Severus looked very interested. "I think this one is much more impressive than my last, don't you?"

Alan put his head in his hands and groaned. Talk about not having a good day.

"Luna, may I ask why your Patronus changed?" Dumbledore inquired. He sounded far too innocent.

"Well, Dumbledore, when a boy and girl love each other –"

Alan remembered that start from his disastrous Talk – and when he was nine and first asking precocious questions. He quickly leaned down and kissed Luna, and, well, when she responded quite avidly, he gently cradled her head – and forgot his father and Headmaster were watching until one of them coughed. He pulled back as though

stung and felt his head swim from the resultant blood rush from one part of his body straight up to his face.

Luna dreamily finished, "Something like that, yes."

Alan wished they'd stop laughing at him like that. Really. It wasn't that funny.

"Why do you think Luna's actions worked?" Alan asked quickly.

Dumbledore stopped chuckling to give Alan a kind smile. "Do you remember our discussion when you brought me the diadem?"

"Which part?" This wasn't improving the topic any. It was walking right back over it again. He was still blushing.

"You were sceptical indeed about the power of love." Dumbledore pointed out. "Even when I told you Voldemort had been most discomfited upon experiencing a touch of your mind when you were feeling most strongly."

"You sure he wasn't just annoyed at the involuntary voyeurism?" Alan hedged, although Luna wasn't distracting him and he couldn't make up any excuse for his current discomfort.

Dumbledore's mouth twitched. "The same report came through telling of his discomfort on Samhain, identical to that over the summer. And whether you remember it or not, if your reaction to Ms. Lovegood's Patronus now was similar to what it was then, you remembered most clearly – and immediately – why that change would happen, did you not?"

Like Hell he did. Alan could only nod; thinking of a few points Luna would probably find highlights, ones he could certainly agree upon.

"Such memories would be something Voldemort could neither understand nor bear." Dumbledore pointed out. "And your feelings for Luna are strong."

"I care for Harry too." Alan pointed out quietly.

"Is it anywhere near as powerful?" Dumbledore asked. "And, additionally, is there not a measure of rivalry between you two? Two young men of similar strength and skill... Do not deny that the chance to test yourself against him measures into your friendship. Voldemort can feed on that feeling to the exclusion of the others."

Alan nodded solemnly, sighing and glancing down at Luna, running his fingers through her hair. "I see what you mean." His lips quirked. "Will I need to have Luna stick by me for the rest of school?"

"I do not believe that level of contact is quite necessary. Voldemort has never managed to breach your Occlumency without some form of aid whether it is exhaustion or a potion. Perhaps he will feel hesitant to contact you so again, feeling how strongly you can love. We cannot be sure, but keep Luna close to your heart and I do not imagine there will be much challenge."

Alan nodded shortly, and asked, "Is there a book I can get to read, then, while I'm stuck here?"

"Your textbooks have been brought, and are sitting on the chair nearby, however I doubt many children find them engaging. I will mention it to Pomfrey and Pince to see if several tomes might be brought down. We have several children who will probably grow exceedingly tired of sitting in a bed all day."

Dumbledore stood and left but Severus remained behind, nodding shortly to Alan and checking on Harry. Alan bit his lip in self-recrimination and yelped when Luna pinched him again.

Severus looked over his shoulder irritably. "What do you keep yelping for, Alan?"

"Luna pinched me!"

"You were getting gloomy again. I had to get those Grinners off you."

"I don't need to be pinched!"

"Enough!" Severus growled. "Luna, I appreciate your attempts but can we have silence for several minutes? I have some delicate work I need to do. You can argue once I am finished."

Alan's face fell and Luna reached up and grabbed his ears – not hard enough to hurt but turning his head to face her fully before she kissed him lightly and pulled back, glaring. Luna had a fairly mean glare, and Alan pulled away as soon as he could and stared at the floor. Despite her efforts, he couldn't help but feel upset. This never would have happened if it hadn't been for him. It wouldn't have mattered if he'd done anything else. He'd been there, and people had been hurt.

Harry was hurt, and still hurting. Alan had already recovered; what had he done to him?

Severus sighed a few minutes later and sat down heavily on a stool. Luna, glaring at Alan like he'd personally wronged her, jumped off his bed and fetched a drink for Severus, taking the Headmaster's vacant seat. Severus glanced between them and frowned.

"What are you being Gryffindor about now, Alan?"

"It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been there."

"No, it wouldn't have." Severus agreed. Alan glanced at him, shocked. "It would have happened somewhere else. Somewhere without Neville and Harry to stop you. Somewhere without Luna to save you from yourself. Very likely more people would have died than just three, and while less may have been hurt, you would have quite possibly hurt yourself. What do you think would have happened had you not been in a room with the only students in school who come anywhere near your power, or without the presence of the Headmaster and the teachers?"

"Harry's still hurt." Alan feebly returned.

"The Dark Arts do that, and I am not as skilled a healer as Pomfrey. I believe she looked over you two and answered that while Harry was likely more critical, for the sheer volume and scope, you were probably in nearly the same condition. This was Harry casting; the

Dark Lord likely channelled his skill and knowledge through your reserves of power, and Harry met him head on.”

Alan ground his teeth together. “And I can barely keep myself alive. Why isn’t he the boy of prophecy? I keep screwing up.”

“You’re human, Alan.” Severus pointed out dryly. “We will always suffer for that fact alone. We make mistakes; things go wrong; we don’t react as well as we could. Alan, you are learning. Do not hate yourself for making a mistake on something you could not anticipate. Harry will recover within the next few days. I expect all three of you will be well before school restarts next week.”

Severus left shortly after that, and Luna frowned at Alan before crawling back onto his bed, pulling a book out of her own bag and leaning against him as though he were a chair without a word. Alan couldn’t really respond, and he sat back and let her.

Before very long had passed, he wrapped his arms around her and leaned his forehead to her crown.

“Luna, why does this make me feel so miserable?”

“Because you’re dwelling on the bad side of things.” She answered flatly. “Grow up.”

Alan grimaced and didn’t ask again. She clearly wasn’t going to be any help.

He was grateful that she at least didn’t pull away and leave him alone. He didn’t want to face the rest of the school with the lives of three students hanging over him, proxy or not.

||||

He was having a nightmare. Antonin Dolohov sat eagerly on his chest, weighing him down, constricting his lungs, as lines of fire dripped from his eyes and crushed against his nose. He couldn’t breathe –

Alan woke and choked; the dream hadn't left with consciousness, and something was pressed tightly against his face. He raised his hands and found them trapped beneath someone's knees, bone pressed painfully down; he stopped trying for fear of snapping his own wrists. He couldn't breathe with the force against his face, and he – he was trapped most effectively in the bed. Alan cursed Pomfrey for doing her hospital corners too damn well, as the blanket, sat on as it was, stopped him from trying his legs.

He couldn't do anything.

Alan found himself calming down surprisingly quickly; someone had told him you used more oxygen when you were fighting, and maybe, maybe his assailant would be fooled by his quiescence. It was a struggle against his own mind, against his burning lungs, his panic at being helpless. He felt like he was going to black out any moment, back to sleep, where he couldn't fight at all... He whimpered against the pillow, or what he supposed was a pillow and wished that anything would interfere.

He didn't want to die.

He sure as Hell didn't want to be smothered in his bed. Why the Hell was he even bothering with a pillow?

Someone's heavy breathing drifted down to his ears, through the strain on his mind, and into his head. Whoever was there was working, strained ... he was blacking out again, and he couldn't ... stop ... it...

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How can breathing be so loud?

Rolling over and pulling his pillow over his head, Harry tried to ignore the noise and nearly leapt out of his socks when somebody gave a choked gasp. Instinct, honed by a recent nightmare and years with pranksters, had him hauling out of his bed and to the floor when a spell lit the room and fizzled against the far wall. The heavy breathing

became strained, and Harry glanced up, cursing under his breath as he couldn't see anything.

Hating the necessity of glasses, Harry tried to locate a bedside table, but the whole bloody room was black as pitch. His hand hit the table, skittered past a phial, knocking it to the floor where it shattered loudly, prompting another spell in his direction. Harry dropped, swearing as his hands hit glass, cut and bleeding. Couldn't she have put an unbreakable phial there, for Merlin's sake?

Okay, he wasn't going to find his glasses. Fine. The pitch black wouldn't matter anyways and he knew where the idiot was.

Harry softly tried to dust his hands free of glass and crept under his bed, moving carefully across the floor to the other side of the room. He'd barely come out from under the bed when he was hit with a spell.

His chest tightened painfully and he moaned, collapsing to the ground and shuddering, his muscles spasming painfully, fitfully, agonizing. He couldn't breathe, and his mind ran away with him, returning to the pain and agony of torture, of being flat on his chest as someone leaned heavily on him as another broke his legs. He wished desperately for it to stop, and suddenly the room filled with light, searing his eyes and prompting him to shriek and duck back under the bed where it was marginally safer. Someone swore; a familiar voice. A second answered, and Harry felt something in his gut tighten as he recognized Draco Malfoy's voice in answer to Neville's. Something shuddered, and then the spell lifted fully, freeing his muscles to relax and blink with concern at Neville, crouched opposite him.

"Harry, what the Hell happened?"

"I ... I don't know. I couldn't see anything. Is Alan all right? He was over there when I woke up."

Neville swore and darted around the bed, running to Alan's side. He swore again, and then hit the door with a spell that made a sound like a gong. Harry glanced that direction moments before the door was slammed open and the lights flared again. Harry curled under his bed

and put his hands over his eyes, swearing miserably to himself, listening intently to the frantic voices, but the remnants of the curse left him unable to concentrate; he couldn't understand what they were going on about, and, finally, he slipped unconscious.

||||

Neville hauled Harry out from beneath his bed and laid him on top, feeling a little woozy but decent. His feet were sore as Hell; he'd stepped on the shattered phial, but stubbornly ignored it long enough to vanish the glass from Harry's hands, clean the blood he'd transferred to his face, and heal his wounds. He checked his condition, but the curse Draco had used was trickling away quickly – it wasn't a lasting one. With that clear, Neville hopped up and gave his feet the treatment he'd given Harry's hands – all the while ignoring the two Healers working with Alan.

Neville shuddered. Alan's lips had been blue when he'd glanced over, and he had been breathing lightly, his pulse thready. When he'd woken up, Draco had still been kneeling on Alan's bed, but he'd leapt off in the bright light, throwing spells. Neville wasn't sure what he'd thrown back at the moment, but he was too groggy to quite be worried yet. When another person hollered out into the hall, Neville stood up and moved around Harry's bed to vanish the glass and clean the blood off the floor. He'd worry about Draco when Alan was a little more stable.

"-The Hell, someone get this ferret out of here! We can't have kids' pets passing out in the Hospital wing."

Neville felt his jaw drop and spun around. Reflexively, he breathlessly lied, "Sorry, I think that's mine. I'll hold him for you." Please say he hadn't done that. Please say that wasn't what he thought. Please let him be wrong.

The Mediwizard thrust the albino ferret into his hands and told him to sit down and asked after Harry in the same breath. Neville mechanically reported what he'd healed and Harry was dismissed after a cursory check. Neville turned his attention to the unconscious white ferret.

Oh Hell. Please let him be wrong.

Oh Hell.

This wasn't the expected result of accidentally using the Animagus spell of non-specific human transfiguration. He'd been thinking something more along the lines of a twisted hairless fleshy red thing from the realms of chaos, but Draco had ended up that cute white ferret Moody had turned him into two years ago. Neville felt himself twitch into a smirk. Oh dear. Did this mean Draco now had an Animagus form? He'd probably have to ask McGonagall. This really wasn't what he'd expected.

Of course, he deserved it. What the Hell was Draco doing in the Hospital Wing anyways, going after Alan aga-

Oh, of course. Neville quickly spoke up, "Do any of you know where Pomfrey or Severus is?"

One of the men glowered. "Pomfrey is fetching several potions right now, and I don't know where Professor Snape would be holed up. What do you need them for?"

"I was only in here for exhaustion. May I leave? I need to carry a message to someone."

The man scowled and waved him off. "Whatever, do what you need to and don't get in our way."

Neville glowered after him, but quickly grabbed his wand and one of the housecoats nearby, alongside the warm slippers and jogged out of the isolation room and through the dark main Wing. He was startled at the number of students still in the area. Half the beds were occupied still. He wasn't sure how many days it had been, at least one he could guess, but that must have been one Hell of a mess to still have children injured with at least five Mediwarts on hand. Perhaps they were exhausted? He thought he saw Lucille, Blaise, and Salvador, but didn't have time to wait around. He needed

McGonagall or Dumbledore or ... anyone, really, who was in the Order.

Neville decided to take a chance and ran to McGonagall's office, wondering if she'd be there, even though he couldn't fathom what time it was. He knocked on the door several times, but got no answer, leading him to jog up the stairs – it was freezing, and he wanted this over with. Remembering what Harry had said, he aimed for the fifth floor, Dumbledore's office, and paused upon reaching the gargoyle.

"Ah, Merlin, Mary and Morgan." Neville groused. "I haven't got a clue what the password could be and for all I know it's one in the morning. But I really need to talk ... Hey, stony. You awake enough to carry a message that I think I found who's been trying to off Alan?" Neville glared at the gargoyle. It glared stubbornly back. Neville doubted he'd be winning any staring contests against it.

Abruptly the stone gargoyle leapt aside, revealing a spiral stone staircase behind it, revolving upstairs. Neville obediently stepped on and went up to the door, curious and amused. When he reached the door, he gently reached for the knocker, but the door swung open before then, to Dumbledore's quiet voice, "Come in, child."

Neville stepped inside and frowned around the room. Dumbledore glanced up, looking quite surprised. "Neville. I hadn't expected you to be awake yet, much less out of Pomfrey's clutches."

"Pomfrey stepped out of the Hospital wing. There was an altercation in the room where Harry, Alan, and I were asleep. Someone got in, and I'm not sure what was going on. I didn't wake until after Harry had – the shattering phial woke me up. Everything's calm now; I got, er ..." Neville flushed, and then held out the ferret. "I'm pretty sure this might be Draco Malfoy. He was the one who got in."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up rather interestingly.

"That's a rather spectacular accomplishment." He offered.

Neville's blush deepened. "I wasn't thinking clearly, sir, and I ... I suspect I used the Animagus spell on him and it attached itself to the

previous form he'd been introduced to. So ... I'm not really sure what this may have done. I just know he's unconscious, and he – he tried to suffocate Alan."

"Is Alan all right?" Dumbledore made to rise, and Neville just shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know. His lips were blue when I checked on him, so I made the door ring and it brought all the Mediwarts in. I left them to deal with it – I don't know how to work with that, and healed Harry's hands and my feet from the glass and the spell Draco used against Harry. I think it's as well in hand as possible."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, and conjured a cage with a sweep of his wand. "Please keep an eye on this cage for the time being. Draco will not be able to change back if he has the option while he is inside it. It would probably be best to keep this ... under wraps until we are more certain. I will have Severus check if Draco might not be somewhere else in case you missed." He looked less than pleased, but Neville accepted the cage without comment, holding the handle carefully as he eyed the litter box, and two dishes – the food one was currently empty.

"I presume you'll get food to me sometime?"

"Just ask the house elves for ferret food and they will come up with something." Dumbledore nodded. "Now, come with me back to the Hospital wing. This needs urgent attention."

Neville followed along in his wake, stepping quickly and trying not to jostle the cage too much. However, ferret-Draco appeared completely out of it and Neville wondered if he was possibly dead or at least brain-dead.

Not that he suspected that was an accomplishment for Draco. Doesn't take much to kill five brain cells.

Dumbledore's presence in the Hospital wing got a flood of information Neville refused to listen it after the first few phrases of 'cyanotic' 'smothered' and 'asphyxiation'. He didn't want to understand the rest

until someone told him Alan would survive. Neville went around Harry's bed and found Luna sitting on his own, her hands folded in her lap, three cards in her hands. When Neville approached she shuffled the cards together and continued shuffling even after he awkwardly sat down beside her.

"Is everything alright?" Neville ventured, putting Draco-the-ferret under the head of his bed.

"Yes and No. Maybe so." Luna hummed. Her tone was sad. "He ... should be fine."

Neville hugged her around the shoulders and sighed. "He will be fine, Luna." He knew his words wouldn't mean much, but when she sighed slightly and smiled faintly at him, he knew they'd meant enough.

A/N: Wheee! On time, together, and so forth! Good stuff, action, death, destruction... and Draco the ferret. Could it get any better?

What, you mean you're worried about Alan? Why would you be worried about Alan? *innocent look* Please Read and Review? And ignore the sugar high.

Fire & Napalm

(P.S. I'm starting to plot the rewrite, fool that I am. Fancy that.)

Chapter Fifty-eight

Draco was not dealt with until the morning after next, by which time Harry and Alan were both awake and well, even if Alan was still a little pale. The attempt had done damage, but the Mediwarts had managed to get his body to compensate for the short-term lack of oxygen. The result left him weak, but he was assured he'd be better by the beginning of next week and the return to classes.

Draco had awoken once in the intervening time, and, judging by his panic, he'd acquired for himself a brand spanking new ferret Animagus. Judging by his irate chittering and scratching, he was less than enthused by the prospect. The pellet food can't have been much less than an insult, either. When he was brought to Dumbledore's office however, with McGonagall, James, Sirius, Frank and Alice present alongside the three boys, he became infinitely quiet.

Neville grinned mirthlessly. Like that would help after what he'd done.

Severus knocked briskly and stalked inside, shutting the door with a finality that had the small ferret wilting and trying to meld with the floor of his cage.

"Alright, Albus, let's get this over with." Severus growled, standing protectively behind Alan's chair.

Albus nodded, and moved to open the cage. Alan spoke up sharply, "And remember Draco, you have four people in this room that can easily chase you no matter your size, or where you try to run, and will gladly eat you when your pathetic attempt fails and they catch up."

The ferret trembled harder, but didn't try to run when Albus pulled him out and held him gently.

"Minerva, would you help me reverse the transformation?"

"Wouldn't you want to test if the spell used allowed him to accomplish the transformation on his own?" Neville put in.

"What spell did you use?" Minerva asked.

"The last part of the Animagus transformation. I don't know any other spells yet that would engender complete human transfiguration, much less know them well enough to have pulled them off in a groggy and half-asleep state."

Minerva raised her eyebrows and then glanced at Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, please attempt to change back to your normal form by your own will. Trust me, it will be far more pleasant than if we have to return you to yourself for you."

The ferret panicked again, and abruptly slid upwards into a mussed looking Draco Malfoy. He flinched from the glares he was receiving. Dumbledore waved him to the chair situated in front of his desk, and, after another glance at the Aurors nearby, he sat down and put on a glower.

"Mr. Malfoy, what were you doing in the back room of the Hospital Wing?"

Draco refused to answer. Neville felt himself begin to get pissed off. Now that his academic miscalculation was dealt with, he could feel angry that Malfoy had tried to kill one of his best friends, rather than startled with what on earth he'd managed pull off.

"Mr. Malfoy, please answer, or I will be forced to use Veritaserum."

He still didn't answer, so Severus stalked over, and pulled his mouth open. Draco wasn't fighting him, and the potion was administered. Dumbledore shuffled several papers tiredly.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes."

"Why were you in the Hospital Wing last night?"

"To kill Alan Prince." Draco answered dully, his tone expressionless and without inflection. "I had to keep trying. The Dark Lord was supposed to kill him when he possessed him, but that failed. I got a

letter this morning that said I had to keep trying, so I snuck in and tried to smother him; I didn't want to use a spell in case there was a watch on the room, but when Potter woke up I panicked. I almost had him dead when Longbottom attacked me and I was knocked out."

The tension in the room had skyrocketed immediately. Dumbledore's raised hand kept order; James Potter grasped his left wrist tight enough to leave white marks on the skin until he forcibly relaxed himself.

"Have you made any other attempts upon Alan Prince's life?"

"Yes. I banished his cauldron the first day in Potions class, to spill it on him. I wasn't aware the tables had barriers to contain any spills. I tried to trap him coming out of his room and failed. I poisoned his dishes at supper two weeks later. Two days after that, under disillusionment, I caught him as he came out of the hidden staircase to Arithmancy and pushed him back down. In October, I tried to smuggle a cursed necklace into the school through Raina on the Hogsmeade weekend, but she said Theodore Nott caught her at it and threatened her, taking the necklace. I couldn't get any answer out of Theodore." Neville stared, shocked. Raina wouldn't be an accomplice; not willingly. A motion from his father kept him, Alan, and Harry silent as Draco continued. "I also picked up a length of cursed chain there, leaving it outside the castle until I left it in the halls before the Quidditch game and cast the trigger spell on Alan while I was seeking. When Alan walked by where I'd stashed it, the chain activated and port keyed him to the place I'd marked – over the lake. Two weeks later, I Imperiused Blaise during Potions to foul up the Potion while Alan had his gloves off, because this time I knew the potion wouldn't spill and it needed maximum coverage. I got another potion two days ago in the mail and slipped it into Alan's drink after following the instructions I'd been given on the spell plate under his seat to convince him to drink and to forget to check anything."

"Under whose orders were you acting?" Dumbledore asked, raising his hand to stem the flood of questions.

"The Dark Lord's."

Dumbledore rubbed his face with his hands and sighed. "What do you know of Raina Kozumplik?"

"She was inducted after torture over the summer." Draco answered flatly, but his shoulders were shaking and so was his voice. "Her father and older brother forced her to. She has avoided everyone as far as I know. It was her older brother's idea for the cursed necklace, and thus was she the chosen carrier. She attempted to poison her family after the Zabini party and failed. She hasn't been seen since, but I'm fairly certain she's alive. Nobody died from her attempt."

Dumbledore nodded sadly, and asked, "What do you know of Theodore Nott?"

"He hasn't been marked. His father reported his refusals and why. He said he would be under suspicion. He said his position in Alan's friends was a vital source of information. He promised reports; I don't think any came. He drew closer to me and Pansy since the beginning of this year. He made a point of making polite conversation. I don't know why he stopped Raina from delivering the cursed necklace or what he did with it; I do know I can see where she's coming from in being intimidated by him. He refused to answer me when I asked why he didn't join. His father was supposed to bring him to be marked after the party, but he died of poison. I suspect Theodore engineered it, even though he says his father was too drunk, a house elf was careless, or someone else did it. He could do it, easily. I know he doesn't miss his father in the slightest."

"Did you desire the mark?" Dumbledore's tone was curious.

"I ..." Draco floundered a moment. "Yes."

"Very well." Dumbledore sighed, and knocked him out once more. "I believe that is all we needed to ask. James, Sirius, Frank and Alice. I believe he is now in your custody."

James walked over and pulled up Draco's sleeve, sneering at the mark, and then straightening. "He'll probably go straight to Azkaban for now, and be tried at some later convenience." He glared down at

him. “Dammit, he’s a child. I’m just glad the Dementors are gone. What’s Voldemort doing, recruiting children?”

“James, we have done much the same.” Dumbledore tiredly pointed out, gently indicated the three boys seated across from him.

Neville sat up straight and glanced somewhere other than at James. That wasn’t a flattering comparison. James retorted, but sounded a little embarrassed.

“That’s different. If you asked them under veritaserum if they wanted to fight they’d answer with no doubt. They wanted this; they fought us for it. Draco couldn’t answer if he’d wanted to fight for Voldemort.”

“He was asked if he wanted the mark.” Alan pointed out tiredly. “Not to fight for Voldemort. Under a truth potion, that’s two different questions.”

“Very true.” Dumbledore nodded. “There should be no more attempts on your life, Alan, at least not from within the school.”

Alan sighed and nodded. “That is a relief, of sorts. I just need to get back to class and move on.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Pomfrey has released Harry and Neville from the Hospital wing, but,”

“Yeah, yeah.” Alan cut him off, standing carefully. “I’m back in there until my magic gets out of my head and back to normal. Two more days...” He staggered slightly, and Severus quickly put his arm around his shoulders to lead him down the stairs. After he left, Sirius, James, and Neville’s parents flooded out with Draco as a prisoner.

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Theodore rapidly proved himself to be as reticent as Draco had said, but Harry bugged Alan into pressing until finally, just before the month turned, they had an answer of sorts.

Apparently Theodore was making an effort to straddle the line towards their side. He swore that if push came to shove he'd go their way, but until he had to, he didn't want to be a part of the war at all. Currently, he could still argue that he wasn't against Voldemort and was intimidated by his harsh rule and his uncontrolled men – including the late Leopold Nott. He said he'd mailed the necklace home from Hogsmeade after taking it from Raina, entrusting it to one of his house elves for protection from idiots. He wasn't stupid enough to think his father would fall for that curse, but he didn't trust him not to use it for his own ends.

Harry, surprisingly, trusted Theodore's answer and so did Alan. When Neville looked ready to scoff, Harry told him to back off, and he subsided with a curious look.

The beginning of February came with the beginning of Apparation lessons. Everyone in their group had signed up, and, as a first Ron found quite funny, none of them were particularly good at it. Susan had gotten the farthest, splinching her leg off, and Hannah refused to talk to Ron for a week after he chortled about it some once she was back together. Susan herself had been put off by it, up until she saw Daphne still trying. If anything, the rivalry between the two girls was something Harry found outright scary at times, and something none of his friends were really all that sympathetic about. Then again, most of his friends had managed to hook up already to some point or another.

Ron, however, was one of the first to notice something was going on with the girls.

"Have you seen Hermione around here anywhere?"

Harry glanced up at Ron walked over, glancing around the table of Slytherins a little self-consciously. Harry marked his place with his finger and twisted to talk to him. "She's not around that I've seen. Why?"

"She's not upstairs." Ron pointed out. "And she's been disappearing like that all week."

"I haven't seen her in the library much myself." Salvador offered. "Although she's occasionally come in and ran off with Lucille. It was a tad scary," He shuddered artfully. "They were giggling. Honestly, one of the reasons I like Lucille is that she doesn't do that horrible female giggling."

The boys laughed, and Neville abruptly pointed out. "None of the girls are present, are they?"

Harry glanced around with everyone else, and, sure enough, all the girls were somewhere else. They all blinked, and Blaise pointed out the wisest course of action. "Let's just pretend we're not suspicious and leave it at that."

The laughter after that quip was strained, but nobody voted to do anything else and they quickly returned to their homework. Harry doubted anyone would be questioning the girls either. If they wanted the boys to know, they'd tell them.

Several days later, they did just that.

The excessive giggling was their first warning. The boys glanced up from their circle in the library, books shutting carefully, wands out. Hermione was pushed into the clearing first, followed by Lucille and Ginny. All three had their wands out, and they weren't in their school robes either. As it was Sunday, the robes weren't required; a few boys were in just trousers and shirts as well. But what they were wearing ... Harry had to blink several times and remind himself Hermione was taken. Those black shirts clung to their bodies in a frightfully arousing manner, and the jeans ... well; he didn't need the mental picture of them struggling to get the damn tight things on.

Why had he immediately wondered what those would look like on Daphne and Susan? Couldn't he have picked one or the other for the thought?

"Alright boys, saddle up. You're coming with us downstairs, savvy?" Lucille clucked out.

"Got that?" Ginny purred.

Hermione rocked her hips sideways, and smiled. "Pretty please?"

Harry was sure he could hear Neville gulp from here.

None of the boys really volunteered to get up first, in fact Theodore looked bored and Alan was trying to finish off an Arithmancy problem still, but after a quick cluck from Lucille, Salvador quickly put his books away and started the rest of the boys on the action. Several spells were discretely cast while the books went away but none of the three girls indicated they knew it was happening. Harry tried one himself, but nope. No glamour. Those were the girls themselves, as unbelievable as that seemed.

Someone had actually talked Hermione into those skin-tight jeans. That was an accomplishment.

When everyone had their bags on their shoulders, and a wry smile on their face as a few, easily guessed, adjusted their pants – Harry was glad the three girls were taken; the reminder of the potential fire fight if he made a move on them kept him from potential discomfort. Going downstairs was curious thing, but everyone followed willingly, even if Alan still looked preoccupied, and a few curious looks -and glares- came Harry and Alan's way as they entered Myrtle's bathroom. Hermione beamed at them.

"Don't worry, neither Harry nor Alan had anything to do with this. It was just a simple matter of Luna getting a recording spell."

Several people blinked; Alan blushed. Harry noted he seemed to do that a lot when Luna came up, and he wondered just how many times he'd managed to get frisky with Luna. He did have to wonder what he could have been doing that he didn't notice Luna using a recording spell ... and why he was saying 'open' in parseltongue too.

Then again, maybe he didn't want to know.

The recording worked perfectly, and the Chamber opened. A faint tinkling bell sounded, and Harry winced. When he noticed he'd done so, he resisted the urge to smack himself. Just because they'd

attached a delicate chime to the Chamber was no reason... Ah, Hell with that. It was so girly. Had they gotten into excessive amounts of sugar quills or something to start doing this? He was getting a touch scared of how strangely they were behaving.

Maybe that was the intent ...

Well, either way they were sent down the pipe after Ginny in order and the girls weren't inviting questions, just covetous or discrete stares depending on the particular boy's dating status. Before Harry went down, he saw Melanie and Nanna march Ron inside. He wasn't sure if he should groan or laugh that his sister and Neville's were also wearing the tight jeans and black shirts. He was, however, grateful that Dillan wasn't there.

Naturally, after he thought that Tracey stalked in with Dillan following. He stopped and nearly tripped on himself when he glanced away from Tracey's backside and saw Nanna.

Harry was just glad it was his turn to go down or else he might have done something regrettable, like hexing him. He was not allowed to go over-protective on Nanna. No matter how badly he wanted to, much less on a Baker.

Landing at the bottom, he was met with a smiling Hannah and Ginny, and instructed to wait to the side with the other boys. Well, Ron would have to forgive him for staring but Hannah had a larger chest than he'd thought. He wasn't going to argue with those. He shook himself to get back on track as he joined Salvador, Alan, and Blaise, waiting for the rest of them to come down quite patiently. He made a quick head count.

Lucille, Hermione and Ginny had fetched them from the library. Tracey had brought Dillan. Nanna and Melanie had brought Ron from Gryffindor tower. Hannah was down here waiting. Where were Luna, Susan, and Daphne? Already further inside? All the boys were accounted for; outside of the library it had only been Ron and Dillan. Theodore and Neville came down before Ron and Dillan did, followed by the rest of the girls. Hermione smiled at Alan and asked him to

close the tunnel, which he did so. After, he asked,

"What are we doing down here?"

"We decided to devise a little pick-me-up for everyone." Hermione smiled. "Just follow me."

After a curious exchange of shrugs and glances, everyone followed. Hey, Alan had done it several times. He was following Hermione; why not give it a shot? Harry wasn't averse to the idea at all. Although the thought of Susan and Daphne being involved made his knees feel a tad weak. He couldn't quite pinpoint the reason 'why' – it was stuck somewhere between dreading the catfight and finding it unbelievably arousing. A few moments later he blushed as he felt his pants get a lot tighter. Great.

Well, he fit in now.

He suspected the only person not currently imagining his girlfriend in various and imaginative ways was Theodore. Then again, his ex was present... Harry wasn't sure if that would be attractive or annoying. They certainly still got along as far as anyone could tell, but this was Theodore.

They reached the second door and found it shut. This time he was asked to open it, and Harry gladly did so, watching for a sign of what was coming. Unfortunately, the room was only lit on the near end, and while something was present at the far end, it wasn't nearly clear enough. Either way, the girls encouraged them to go through and wait by the wall. A second look made Harry blink several times. Was that a curtain back there? It was quite long ...

"Boys, drop your bags here and come along." Lucille strutted ahead and Salvador didn't pause in following her orders. Not even the soft chuckles of his friends would deter him from obeying Lucille's beck and call. Since Christmas they had been so tightly meshed together it was almost frightening. Lucille was in his lap every moment she found the chance, and Salvador occasionally slipped enough to have

a soft smile on his face. Both of them were ecstatically happy to be together.

God save you if you teased them, though.

Typical Slytherins.

Lucille clapped her hands and the torches all lit themselves, dazzling the eyes. A long curtain spanned the room, which with how high it rose was a damn impressive feat, and cut off the ugly statue from view. In front of them was a long stage in a horseshoe shape, a semicircle of chairs several feet back. Lucille pushed Salvador into his seat, and pointed at the rest of the chairs.

“Sit. Alan, here,” She indicated the seat next to Salvador. “Ron, Harry, Neville, Blaise, Theodore, Dillan.”

Harry took his seat with a faint smile, turning to Neville. “Oh, we can tell who planned this, now can’t we?”

“Harry, hush.” Neville scolded.

Harry subsided with a faint smile, enjoying being able to tease Neville with Hermione again. Lucille stepped back and smiled at them all. The other girls had disappeared.

“Now then. You will listen as Melanie and Nanna read the rules, and you will sit back, relax, and enjoy yourselves.” She raised her eyebrows. “Without scarring the impressionable young minds we invited here. Or your friends.”

Melanie and Nanna giggled delicately, and saluted Lucille simultaneously as she stalked out behind the curtain. Melanie and Nanna stood in front of the stage, coughed in synch, and pulled out small scrolls that they unrolled and read in unison.

“Boys, we grant you a late Valentine’s gift in return for your care and kindness,” They lowered the scroll momentarily and changed to a wry tone, watching Theodore, “Theodore, you can ignore that part, you’re just here because you were with them at the time,” They coughed and

raised the scrolls again, ignoring Theodore's grin, "and hope you will find this enjoyable despite the fun we had ordering you around. Thank you for your compliance. Please keep your eyes on the stage and anything not waterproof should be doffed immediately and handed to the attendants, us, before the show begins. No matter how tempting it is, you are not allowed to jack off or mob the stage. You can get some wet hugs and kisses after the fact. Thank you, and enjoy."

They pocketed the scrolls in synch and asked, united, "Anything to be spared the water treatment?"

Harry took off his watch and fished a set of notes from his pockets. Several others had small things they put into a bag that was tied and tagged with their name before Nanna and Melanie tucked them in a closed purse each of them had on their shoulder. Once that was done, they asked, in stereo again, "Any questions? Please note you are welcome to cover your eyes at any time; there will be no offence taken. However, you are not allowed to pick a fight amongst yourselves over the choice to do so or not. Thank you."

Nobody spoke up, eyeing the stage with desperate curiosity. What the Hell had these girls cooked up? Nanna and Melanie separated to the sidelines, and then clapped twice. The lights dimmed, a low heavy beat started, and the stage floor lit up. Neville was staring at the stage, clearly deathly curious and intent on interrogating the girls, when Harry suddenly laughed and punched his shoulder. Neville looked up – and gulped audibly. The others laughed.

Hermione was stalking down the stage from the left, opposite Lucille on the right. Both of them were wearing a knee length, delicate looking white robe that clung to their curves as they walked. Hermione's face was slightly pink, her hair was tied back in a loose ponytail, and she was barefoot. She managed the walk pretty good, though. Lucille had just left her hair down, and she was staring down Salvador as though she wanted to eat him. Harry started the clapping first, but a firm thump in the beat hushed the spattering of applause.

When each girl reached the end of the horseshoe, the bend that was near the boys, they paused several feet apart and posed, changing

from one leg bent, arms akimbo, to blowing a kiss to the crowd, to various others that suited their fancy. Abruptly, several seconds after they'd started, a fountain of water splashed from the spot dead centre, aimed at both sides. The water was pretty powerful; both girls had to stumble a bit to keep their balance, but they turned into the water, and around, soaked from all angles. And, well ... white delicate fabric plus water. Neville's face was hot enough to cook an egg off of, but he certainly hadn't covered his eyes. Fortunately, in part, the girls weren't quite naked under their flimsy robes or he didn't think they were. The water was cold enough to make the nipples stick out, but they likely wore undergarments coloured to blend in as no particular colours stood out.

Course, he could be seeing wrong. He was blushing as badly as Neville. He didn't even dare glance at Lucille. Salvador might kill him. But... He was too curious for his own good.

Lucille's hair was plastered down her shoulders and back, sticking to the fabric. Either the fabric chosen was different or something, because there were two specks of pink on her breasts in the appropriate places, although nothing showed up down yonder despite the fabric getting stuck there. Maybe because she was blonde or ... he cut off that train of thought. Those were dangerous thoughts, particularly about Lucille.

The fountain died down shortly, and the girls in question took a faint curtsey and stepped down off a short set of steps, walking to stand by the edge of the curves of the stage. Nanna abruptly shouted, "Cover Ron's eyes!" just before Luna and Ginny stalked out. Ron gaped, ready to make an indignant outcry, and Harry just put him in an affectionate headlock, leaning down to whisper, "You wanna be awake to see Hannah?"

He gulped, and apologized, sitting up and putting his hands over his eyes. Harry snickered and watched Alan leaning back in his seat, watching Luna's every move with hungry eyes and a predatory grin. It was actually honestly funny watching her; she was practically skipping up the stage, staring dreamily into space. Ginny was prowling the distance like a lioness, and Blaise was watching with equal intensity. They reached the same point Hermione and Lucille

had and moved into the posing, awaiting the fountain. Interestingly enough, the wet clothes showed that Ginny had quite the skin tone to show off under the white fabric, and was clearly bold enough that Harry glimpsed red down yonder, somewhere he did not want his eyes going on Ginny Weasley before he glanced at Luna. Her skin looked as white as her shirt, only a suggestion of pink letting him think she wasn't wearing a bra like Hermione had to hide the marks and her hair so blonde he couldn't have guessed the bottom half even if he'd looked. The cloth hugged her figure quite well though, and he laughed shortly and watched them flounce off quite happily.

Harry elbowed Ron when Ginny was over on the other side of the stage and he glanced up in time to watch Hannah stalk out with Tracey. Theodore immediately catcalled Tracey who flipped him off as she walked, a wide grin on her face. Both girls reached the centre, and Hannah was giving herself a coy, innocent look. Tracey was trying to set their blood boiling, and a lot of the boys were looking at her, which very likely suited Ron and Hannah fine. Knowing Tracey, she wanted it that way as well. Hannah met the water with a little squeak, and Tracey crouched to catch the spray in her face straightening slowly and thrusting her chest into prominence. He had to admit, it was a very nice chest and the suggestions she was making were not lost on him in the least. Theodore called out a highly rude suggestion, to which she splashed water out of the stream at them, and then, when it turned off and she left the stage, she tossed her hair Theodore's direction, spattering more water onto them. Hannah's slightly pink colour didn't stop her from turning to wink at Ron.

Suddenly the girls all started clapping, and Harry's brain caught up with him. That was all the girls – but two. He was tempted to call it a night, but instead just slid down in his seat as both Susan and Daphne stalked out of the curtain and up the walkway.

Oh, shit.

Oh, shit.

Merlin, Mary and Mordred, he would never live this down.

Susan was just ... he stared for a long time, honestly. He abruptly realized her hair had grown back enough to now sweep easily over her shoulders, straight and loose as she stared him down with a heat he had never associated with any Hufflepuff but her. Her figure was lean, but short. She certainly had that over Daphne; Daphne could look him in the eye. But Daphne ...

She was stalking down the stage like Tracey had, long sweeping strides that made her chest jiggle enticingly and pulled the fabric tight across her long legs. Her eyes were smouldering desire that made him bite his lip, and she licked her lips as she stalked forward.

Harry huffed under his breath, "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred."

They stopped at the front, just far enough apart he had to turn slightly to appreciate one or the other as they lifted the hem further up their thigh or ran their hands down their torso. This was getting a lot hotter than the other girls, probably due to the competition they felt. He'd notice them glance at each other as often as they looked down at him, and Daphne flipped off Ron when he made a catcall like Theodore had to Tracey.

The fountain started and Harry's cheeks burned as both girls stepped into it. Susan stepped momentarily on top of the spray, letting a jet go up under the fabric to her nether regions, and Harry stifled the desire to groan. This was freaking dirty pool! It helped, slightly, as he started to get himself under control and he began to smile a lot easier, bursting into a grin as he looked from one to the other. He was interested to note that Susan's nipples showed up better than Daphne's, but that he suspected Daphne wasn't wearing panties while Susan was. He wasn't sure which was more arousing. He laughed when the other boy's groaned at the fountain's turning off, and stood up to clap for the girls. Neville joined him, and Salvador called out, "Bravo!"

The girls curtseyed as best they could in the clinging wet robes, and Daphne literally jumped off the stage to come to him, Susan following behind as she took the stairs. Daphne threw herself into his arms, and, well, what was he supposed to do? Ignore her? He kissed her back, happily, pleasantly, wonderful fizz starting in his toes and

running up his body in spite of the cold water soaking through his jeans and shirt. After several minutes, Daphne let him go and grinned, but as she turned triumphantly to Susan, Harry let her go and held out his hand to Susan. Susan smirked at Daphne and pulled him down into a kiss of her own, seeking and giving and making her own bid for his attention.

Dammit, why did there have to be two of them?

A lot of the other boys received wet hugs and wet kisses, quite happily enjoying this and laughing and teasing each other. As Alan and Luna were quite thoroughly exploring each other, Blaise finally coughed and broke in,

"Wow, Alan. I hadn't known the cure for possession was to be found in Lovegood's knickers."

Alan let Luna breathe and glared at Blaise. "Cute. Real cute."

"Oh, it's not like he's wrong." Neville butted in. "Really."

"Go back to discussing the spells on the stage." Alan ordered.

Hermione snickered and Neville blushed, muttering, "I'm not that obvious, am I?"

"No more obvious than when Hermione suggested the idea and had to be 'convinced' to join the runway." Lucille grinned.

It was Hermione's turn to blush, and she turned back to Neville, pointing ostentatiously at the area where the fountain had arisen. Neville pulled her up there to look closer. That, more than anything, indicated how flustered he was. Naturally, as he and Hermione were looking at it, the fountain turned on again. They were both soaked in cold water, Hermione's robe clinging to her once more, and Neville yelping like a stung dog. They glared at Lucille, who pointed to Ginny and Blaise.

The show dissolved into a good-natured game of who can hex who the most times. If a girl's robe flipped up, or got wet again, it was an accident.

Honestly.

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At the end of the week, it was a Hogsmeade weekend and Ron's birthday. He was ecstatic about his gifts; being friends even distantly with several Slytherins got him an expensive set of trainers, aside from all the other expected gifts, including the Firebolt Harry had determined to get him in the beginning of the year. He had to be talked into leaving it in the dorm, but once that was done he gleefully joined the others as they wandered downstairs and out to the town. Neville waved off an invite, standing nervously in the common room. Harry had a strong suspicion what he was gearing himself up for and pulled Ron out after him with a snort. Ron took only a moment to catch on and started laughing himself. They met up with Alan and his friends, all of them eyeing them carefully. Harry winked at Alan.

"I think Neville's showing some Gryffindor traits."

"Hardly." Alan snorted. "It took him this long?"

"I suppose you're right." Harry nodded solemnly. "You would know, wouldn't you, you Gryfferin?"

Alan blinked and growled. "Start running. Now. I will hunt you down for using that ridiculous moniker again."

Harry laughed indeed, and took off running, waving to Sybilla as he passed her and waiting for a nod before starting to all-out sprint down the trail. He heard a roar of laughter, and lost it in the rush of wind. Darting around other students, he glimpsed them wave, laugh, or mock tripping him. He was breathing heavily by the gate, and before he passed it, Alan grabbed his shoulder leading them both to stumble, trip, and roll onto the ground. After several minutes, they both caught enough breath to lie there and laugh, Harry waiting until he could breathe again before pointing out,

"You are so Gryffindor, Alan." He ignored the half-hearted punch to his arm. "I swear. You will do something insanely Gryffindor when you're fighting Voldemort. It'd be so you."

"I will not." Alan groused. "Stop mocking me. If I do something that stupid, I'll transfer to Gryffindor. You can sleep in Slytherin in my stead. Sound funny to you?"

Harry was snickering too hard to answer.

Alan glared at him and huffed. "Oh, shut up."

"No." Harry snickered out. "Too ... funny. Poor ... Theodore."

"Theodore will sic Crabbe and Goyle on you." Alan warned.

That just made Harry laugh harder. He rolled onto his side and coughed, unable to stop. Alan started snickering as well. Their friends finally caught up and Blaise looked down at them, shaking his head.

"You two are hopeless."

"No!" Harry argued. "It's just ... Hee hee hee. 'Crabbe! Fetch me my slippers!'"

Alan started laughing out loud, flat on his back. Blaise struggled not to smile, and said, "They're not quite that stupid, you know."

"Close enough." Harry argued.

Ron hollered at them both, "Harry hurry up and get over here or I'm stealing Susan as my second date!"

That brought Harry hopping to his feet, still laughing softly. He turned and poked Alan in the side and then staggered as he moved over to Susan. She giggled at him, and sniffed.

"Have a good roll in the hay with Alan?"

Harry just groaned. "Susan, that joke was old ... I don't know when. Ages ago."

"C'mon, hardly anyone uses it." Susan offered. "I've never heard it that often."

"That's Hufflepuff for you." Harry shrugged. "Not many of them willing to toss mud around."

"Oh, we throw plenty of mud." Susan nodded. "We just keep it within the house."

"Was that why you vetoed my idea for you and Daphne to mudwrestle?" Lucille asked curiously.

Harry blushed viciously as the image assaulted his senses. Susan wasn't faring much better, and Harry quickly offered her his arm and addressed Ron, "Coming, oh mighty birthday boy?"

Ron sniggered and followed as they split away, wandering to the village and down the street, laughing quietly. Ron jumped and quickly pointed ahead. "Harry, look!"

Zonko's was gone; a few days ago the news had told of the death of the owner of that particular store, but remarkably, the building was open. It didn't take much of a look to figure out what had happened, though: the building was an eyesore in the middle of the relatively drab storefronts around it with the Ministry announcement posters. Weasley Wizard Wheezes had opened in Hogsmeade, and the children were flocking inside as often as they entered Honeydukes across the way. Gleefully, Harry and Ron went inside immediately, and they were ambushed at the door.

"Ronnikins!"

"Little brother!"

The twins grabbed Ron immediately, one of them mindfully begging Hannah's leave, and then hauled him towards the till, where they spun him around and quickly set off loud firecrackers from their

wands. Ron was the infamous Weasley red and didn't manage to make any headway on struggling out of their grips.

"Store full of lovely children, we beg your attention to bring you the remarkable announcement,"

"Our lovely dear brother,"

"One of the last of our line holding court in Hogwarts, less our little sister,"

"Is come to his majority today!"

And they immediately broke into song, the birthday song, naturally, with altered lyrics that rendered several people into gut-wrenching guffaws and granted each twin a makeover as Hannah hexed both of them with Ginny's bat bogey hex (she'd refused to teach the boys but apparently it hadn't extended to her fellow women). Ron escaped as the twins jerked aside and struggled the end the hex on each other, swearing good-naturedly.

It took them nearly five minutes, and Harry took the break in chaos to bid Ron well and remind him they could visit the place again later or he could wait for his present. Ron chose to wait, but Harry slipped out with Susan, wandering into Honeydukes. Naturally, he got ambushed there too – this time by Daphne. Susan sniffed, but told her she could hang out as well. Harry wondered if they were trying to kill him; he was blushing again. Sugar helped allay his distress, and, well, the girls liked it, so he got a fair bit of that, and politely allowed both Susan and Daphne to destroy his box of his Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, laughing at the strange flavours and when one of them had to spit one out.

They were paused outside the window of the Three Broomsticks when the man in black apparated in front of them. Harry grabbed Susan immediately and moved her behind him, watching carefully. The moment he saw the white mask, a blasting curse threw the Death Eater into another recently apparated fellow of his. Behind him, Daphne screamed and he turned immediately, throwing a cutting curse: Alan's dark cutting curse. The man lost his arm, and Susan

shrieked as well, even as she pulled Daphne to the door to the Three Broomsticks, even as Harry turned further and cast again and again. Four Death Eaters nearby were knocked down, not for good, but for the moment.

Harry turned around immediately and eyed Daphne, recalling the spell required to check damage and spell residue. He vaguely knew the curse she was under, but not the counter. He grabbed his mirror out of his pocket, thanking heaven he'd done as Alan had and merged them, and thrust it at Susan.

“Once you’re in there, call for Neville and get the countercurse to the fifth dark bleeder curse. He’ll know what I mean. Use mobilicorpus and block yourselves in there. I don’t see many Death Eaters here, so just hang tight.”

Susan nodded, pale already but she quickly lifted Daphne and darted inside. Harry didn’t wait for her, stunning the man he’d lopped the arm off of, and throwing a bodybind at the two who were beyond the door. He turned around and raced back to Honeydukes, his heart constricting as he saw his little sister, back to back with Dillan, surrounded on all sides. Dillan was reaping some decent destruction, but he wasn’t skilled enough to overpower their shields. Harry came from behind and tilted the fight, bringing down two more men and thrusting the rest to the street. Dillan grabbed Nanna’s arm and she grabbed back, both of them shouting to the other students to get inside, somewhere defensible. Harry ran past, glancing at the two, lumbering Death Eaters whaling on Weasley Wizard Wheezes and getting peppered with spells. One of them sent a spell inside and someone, a woman, shrieked in agony only to be cut off abruptly. Harry was tempted to enter, but a green flash startled him; he jumped aside and turned, seeing Voldemort and feeling cold trickle down his spine.

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Alan did not know what Luna loved about Scrivenshafts, but she always wanted to make a trip inside and who was he to deny his girlfriend? She was already flicking through the quills and humming to herself, moving to the bound notebooks and sheaves of parchment ...

he followed her indulgently, happily even, looking around himself and enjoying seeing her so pleased.

They were looking at the ink selection when someone screamed outside, and Alan spun in place. Luna whispered, "Darkness falls."

That was enough for him. He ran to the front and slammed out the front door; light flashed in his peripheral vision, and he threw himself into a front roll, bruising his shoulder and skidded onto his side, scrambling to his feet.

Voldemort

The Dark Lord glared down at him, and Alan stared back, silently edging to the doorway of the store; he wanted cover on his back first, thank you. He saw white hair in his peripheral vision, and turned to look. Luna suddenly grabbed his robes and threw him backwards, landing on him as he turned to protect her; something snapped sharply, but feeling no pain he ignored it as the spell roared overheard and shattered the nearest store's windows. Alan scrambled inside the doorway and hissed at Luna,

"What are you thinking? Get inside!"

"Alan, you're in danger; I'm not a damsel!" Luna snapped.

Alan heard another curse and moved for his wand – and froze. "Merlin, Mary, and Mordred!" Alan hissed, astonished. His wand was broken. Again. This time, completely.

Luna saw it, licked her lips, and took the two separate pieces from him. "Use mine."

"Luna, I can't –"

"It's yours for the moment, you have my trust. Use my wand, Alan!"

Alan could feel the wand testing him, pressing. He stared down at the unfamiliar wood and bit his lip. He didn't have much choice, he hadn't

brought his second wand to Hogsmeade, and Luna had given him the use for the time being. He just hoped that actually worked.

“Come out, come out.” Voldemort called softly.

Alan pressed against the space one moment longer, and saw with relief Luna pull out her old wand, tucking his pieces into her pocket lovingly. Assured of her safety, as much as could be expected, Alan twisted out and threw a blasting curse at the Dark Lord. The wand resisted a moment, and then gave in. The spell flew straight and true, and knocked him off his feet.

Wow, Alan thought, that’s not half bad at all.

He tried several more, high level spells, and they came off easily, beautifully. He had enough time to scold himself to not be jealous of Luna’s wand before Voldemort attacked back and he didn’t have time for much other than paying attention to where the spells went. After a few more exchanges, he was dodging killing curses, and wondering what Voldemort was so irate about that proximity made his head hurt so much.

“Do you know what you’ve been up to, Alan?” Voldemort called.
“What you brought upon me?”

“Mortality, perhaps?” Alan asked mockingly. “Your snake, your relics. What of them?”

Voldemort suddenly gave a twisted smile. “I know you destroyed them all, or at least all those you could find.”

“How many were there?” Alan threw at him. “Six?”

“Seven, actually.” Voldemort tossed back, along with a horrible blood-boiling hex. Alan dodged and staggered. Seven! What was the last one? What the Hell could it possibly be?

“That makes eight pieces. Not so mighty a number.” Alan stalled.

“It was unintentional.” Voldemort allowed, smiling grimly. “But ironic.”

This is for irony.

Alan blinked and focused on the spellwork. Where'd he hear that? Harry, after his torture, right? Nanna had complained about it, regarding the cut on his eye. A cut in the shape of a lightening bolt. He'd said Voldemort had told him if he was so like Alan he could have another mark.

Unintentional.

Death.

Mark.

Oh Hell no.

"You really fucked up that night, didn't you?" Alan called, trying to distract himself.

"Quite." Voldemort agreed. "However, the problem may be easily remedied with little loss."

"Gonna lock me in a box?" Alan scoffed. "Like that'll work."

"You might say that."

Voldemort twisted faster than any human had a right to, and Alan found himself knocked off balance, then jerked forward by his robes. His feet didn't leave the ground – he was far too tall for that, but as Voldemort was just shy of his height, he certainly was pulled to his toes, staring shortly down at him with a grimace. Voldemort levelled his wand at Alan's right eye and a strong tug occurred on his Occlumency shields.

Alan considered his options and shifted to one leg, firmly kicking Voldemort's nearest shin. Voldemort swore, staggered, and Alan twisted out of his grip, dancing out to circle him again, thinking. He glanced around. Harry was engaged with another Death Eater just beyond, but winning. There were a few bodies down, but not many.

Snape was duelling two further up the way, and Luna was exchanging spells with the last nearby from the doorway to Scrivenshafts, another customer maintaining a shield for her. Beyond, there was a skirmish, but it wasn't large. Even as he watched, people ran their direction, Tracey among those he recognized. They were winning just fine. Alan knew Harry could hold his own against Voldemort, and so could his father.

This was his fight, and they were so close to finished. Just one horcrux left, and Voldemort would be mortal. Killing him with a horcrux left didn't leave Alan feeling confident; what if he got possessed again? Swallowing the lump in his throat, Alan grinned back at Voldemort and resigned himself to a stupid chance.

"So, I take it you want something from me?" Alan asked cockily.

Voldemort smiled confidently back. "It won't hurt very long, I promise. I have much practice, I assure you."

Alan laughed brashly. "True, very true. I'll even take your word for that, now shouldn't I?"

"Do you think I lie?"

"Not in the least." Alan grinned, raising his wand straight up. "After all, you've already been through it, haven't you?"

Voldemort's face pinched, and Alan started the curse, "Avada-

Voldemort was disgusting, a vile creature to the core; he knew that as he pointed his wand at his right eye,

"-Kedavra."

He hated every piece of him.

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Harry growled as Dolohov ducked aside again and cast the firewhip, lashing out at him and hissing a curse as he missed again. Dolohov

was casting fairly quickly and agilely, but he wasn't moving as fast as he had been, and Harry had kept him hopping. He shot once more, and Dolohov nearly caught him with a spell. He dropped the whip and launched a series of bone breakers and tossed a blood-boiling curse in amidst them. The weak shield he was using failed and Dolohov screamed. Harry turned away before he could lose his lunch over what he'd just done and scanned the fights. Alan had just twisted away from Voldemort's grasp; Harry's heart skipped a beat and he swore under his breath, watching as Alan started pacing carefully at a distance, scanning around much as Harry had. Tracey turned and hexed the large blonde Death Eater by WWW, and then was set upon by Emmeline Pupp. Harry turned aside and moved towards Voldemort in time to see Alan grin recklessly.

Harry grimaced. That look never promised anything good. When Alan's wand tip glowed green while aimed upright, Harry couldn't fathom what he was doing.

When Alan turned his wand on himself, Harry could feel his heart stop.

"What the Hell did you do to him?" Harry screamed, bursting into a run, straight through the circle. Alan wouldn't do that! How did it happen, how did he get him into that position? He didn't register Voldemort's rage, but both of them could agree on one thing: the other was a perfect outlet for their rage.

Blind with fury, Harry still took the effort after blasting the ground beneath Voldemort to banish Alan's body towards Scrivenshafts, not too successfully but out of range of their area, where Harry was driving Voldemort.

Their wands lashed; Harry stumbled over his own feet as his spells left, gorged with power and fury. His shield strained under the pressure of the spells deflected. He was already familiar with Voldemort's pattern of attack from the two times he'd fought him before, familiar enough that keeping moving out of his reach took little thought.

He didn't realize the spells were almost too powerful, didn't notice his wand arm shaking, nor that Voldemort's also shivered, his eyes locked on Harry as the small young man met him head on in a blaze of power. Neither saw the small audience, as those who had dispatched their Death Eaters paused to gaze upon the fight, and listen to the distant thrum of phoenix song as the spells left golden splatters of fire on the ground once spent.

Suddenly Voldemort tripped, wide-eyed, startled and frightened. Harry brought back his firewhip and slapped it around his opponent's waist, throwing him over his head and into the window behind him, remembering a moment too late that Alan was over there.

Alan ... God, why him? Why did he have to die?

His thoughts halted at the sharp report of a gun.

A/N: And while some of you may have forgotten it happened in this chapter due to the incongruity, the wet t-shirt contest was inspired by Big D's work. Thank you.

Aside from that, what do you think? Decent chapter, hm?

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Fifty-nine

Well, his reputation was shot.

Neville nervously wrung his hands behind his back and shifted, waiting for Hermione to come down. It was taking forever. Maybe she'd already left. He didn't think so; Averill had told him she was still up there when she came down, but what if ... what if...

Neville took a deep breath, let it out, and waited another few minutes for his reward. When Hermione stepped down, he smiled warmly at her. She blinked, and hesitantly smiled back, smoothing her shirt. Neville's nerves kept his attention on her face, and her impossible hair, and he quickly stepped aside.

"Hermione, would you talk with me for a minute or two?"

"Sure."

She took the other end of the couch and waited, her hands folded in her lap. They were practically alone: most everyone else was already gone, the first and second years slipped away to library or on the far side of the room. Neville smiled, awkwardly bobbing his head and starting, "Your clothes are nice today." Well, she was wearing a well-fitted shirt and the jeans he suspected she'd worn to the wet robe contest, although he'd only taken those in on the way to her face – where he'd know if he'd failed or not. Hermione's answering smile and nod was awkward, so he hurried on. "I'm really glad you set that up for all of us. The show. It was very nice, and not just because you're gorgeous." He ignored his blush and hers. "I know Harry and Alan were really stressed, and that helped everyone to just relax, not to mention getting Susan and Daphne another chance to tease Harry." Neville finished with a short laugh.

Hermione was also blushing. "Thank you, Neville. I was really happy with how it turned out as well. Harry was absolutely flabbergasted. Alan wasn't as excited about it as I thought he would be."

"He's already sleeping with Luna on occasion." Neville pointed out. Hermione pursed her lips.

"Luna didn't mention that."

"She wouldn't. Would you?"

Hermione flushed. "If I was sleeping with you I'd doubt I'd have to mention it for the beaming."

Neville gulped and turned bright red; Hermione slapped her hands to her mouth, and whispered, "Oh my God, I didn't mean to say that, or not like that, or I'm so sorry I shouldn't have said that. Well, I did, but I don't –" She buried her face in her hands and rocked softly before swearing curtly. Neville just swallowed.

"It's alright, I know that was a slip. Everyone has them." Okay, so maybe he was feeling a little light headed from hope. He just didn't want that ruining his judgement or apology or whatever this was. "Look, Hermione? I just wanted to say something."

Hermione moved her hands down to just covering her mouth and gave him an honest and attentive look. Neville struggled not to grin at how silly it looked – and adorable.

"I'm sorry I hurt you last year, and I hope we've moved beyond it." He gulped softly. "I'll understand if you still haven't, but I really treasured you in the beginning of fifth year and want you to understand. If you're agreeable, I hope I won't make such a colossal mistake again. Do you want ... to try again?" He finished quietly.

Hermione lowered her hands and took a careful, deep breath. "I was really hurt by your rejection, Neville. But ... I understand you weren't in your right mind at the time. I think I've come to terms with it, and how hurt you really were." She smiled weakly. "I'm more than willing to try."

She leaned forward and gave him a long, lingering kiss. Neville couldn't respond at the moment because he was too overwhelmed, but when she hesitated and moved to pull back, Neville put a gentle hand on her neck and stopped her, pressing back before bringing himself to lick her lip slightly. Hermione was never one to not take an

opening when given one. He lost himself for the next indeterminable time, until his name suddenly shouted from within his pocket. Neville swore under his breath at Harry, but Hermione had already sat back. He pulled out the mirror and blinked when he saw Susan, tears streaking down her face.

“Susan, what’s wrong?”

“Death Eaters are in the village.” She offered quietly. “Daphne got hit with a curse. Harry said it was the fifth Dark bleeder curse and you’d know the counter.”

“Aemgleo; wand motion is a tear drop – start high, bring it down and around to the high point again, and then a sharp flick down over the abdomen.” Neville traced his finger through the air to indicate what he meant. “You’re going to want to focus hard on putting as much strength into it as you can. Is there any other damage, as far as you know? Anything visible?”

“No.” Susan sobbed. “It’s all so overwhelming. Gimme a min to try ...”

“Susan, I can’t help you any more. I’m coming down; if nothing else, she’ll survive until I get there. It’s not a particularly prolific curse. I’m coming as fast as I can.”

“Okay.” She sniffed. “Hurry, Neville, please.”

Hermione was listening intently and immediately leapt off him, her wand in her hand, moments before he scrambled up himself, mirror shoved fiercely into his pocket, to run to the door, Hermione following. He didn’t care if the fight ended while he ran, or if the area was crawling with dementors or if Dumbledore or Voldemort himself was already present, his friends were in that village and he wasn’t staying inside. Someone needed him. Hermione remarkably kept up with him until he jumped the last three stairs to the Great Hall, and paused, considering his options.

“Wait!” Hermione shouted. Neville glanced back, annoyed, “At least let me get on first.”

Neville smiled thinly. You got to love a woman who understands.
“Sure.”

He changed, and Hermione frowned before hauling herself up awkwardly. Neville determined to get her horseback riding lessons as well, and then trotted out of the Entrance Hall, lightly jumping down the front steps. Hermione held on, squeaking and changing her grip until she whispered, “Right. Let’s go.”

Neville trotted and then broke into a full out gallop. He was going to get to Hogsmeade. Nothing was getting in his way.

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Someone was tapping his cheek. And it was very very loud. Something was sizzling. Sinisterly.

Was that even possible? Sinister sizzling?

Someone was still tapping his cheek. And humming. He blinked open one eye and found a fuzzy blonde mess staring down at him. Was he lying down? He opened the other eye but his vision only cleared; he wasn’t seeing anything else. Whoever was tapping his cheek suddenly leaned down and kissed him gently before stroking his cheek.

“Alan, are you awake?”

Alan blinked and then nodded carefully. He immediately regretted it. His head was pounding. He couldn’t remember what had happened. And would that noise stop already?

“I knew if we loved you enough you’d come back.” Luna beamed at him, speaking singsong and lightly as though she knew his head hurt. What did she mean, come back? He hadn’t gone anywhere ...

Oh. Wait.

“... Oops?” Alan whispered. “Sorry. Had to take care of something.”

Luna blinked owlishly at him, and then abruptly ducked. Alan scrambled into a sitting position, fighting his swinging head, hand plunging into his pocket and grabbing the first thing he got his fingers on. The window they were near shattered; something large, black and draped in fabric smashed into it, shards flying. They bounced off a shield Luna had gotten up, the shield sputtering as soon as the glass ended, and the figure slumped to the ground landing with one arm over Alan's legs. Alan was tense as a drum, his mind thrumming, as he remembered, that again; what's wrong with my head that I have to remember this? and stared blankly at Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord struggled to lift his head, and abruptly met Alan's eyes.

His expression of astonishment was one Alan prayed he never forgot.

"Oh," Alan grinned tensely. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and pressed the barrel of the gun between Voldemort's eyes. "How's it feel to be a mortal man again, huh?"

The satisfaction of the clean, definite death was more than worth the blazing pain the report elicited from his pounding head.

Of course, the next scream didn't help matters any.

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"What in the glory Fucking-"

Harry drifted into a tangent of indiscriminate swearing, going through Alan's parentage, personal habits, and preferences and ending on the screamed insistence of, "WHY?"

Only then did he realize Alan was clutching his head in agony, eyes shut tight as Luna gently rubbed circles on his temples, apparently finding it unnecessary to stop Harry's ranting. He couldn't blame her. That shock... After several moments of silence, Alan managed a weak,

"Um, could we discuss this when my head is back on straight?"

Harry suppressed his desire to scream again and stalked over to Alan and grabbed his hand, pulling him upright. Severus stalked over and fumbled a phial out of his robes, thrusting it into Alan's hands. Alan muttered something along the lines of, "Thank God," and struggled with the stopper. Luna got it out for him and helped him tilt it back. Its effects were immediate. His shoulders relaxed, his eyes –eye, the other had its scar plainly visible- focusing between the two men staring at him. He gently covered Luna's hand on his arm with his free hand and gave the two men a weak smile.

"Um, yeah."

"What in the blazes did you think you were doing?" Severus growled. "Standing there and offing yourself in the middle of a fight! Was Voldemort not doing a good enough job? Felt you had to hurry it along? I cannot believe he could get into your mind to make you do something so insane."

"Well," Alan attempted. "Hurrying it along is good. He was playing, and no, he didn't bespell me," He flinched as Severus' eyes flashed. Harry wasn't feeling much better, "... and something about seven horcruxes." Luna gave a small gasp, staring at him and looking mildly lost before slowly blooming to incredulously happy as he continued to speak. "He said he'd messed up ... or did I say that?" Alan rubbed his temples again; he was plainly struggling to think straight. Small wonder; let's just throw a death curse at our head and see how well we survive it. "Anyways, he wanted to take my eye out so I did it for him. I kinda ... thought? Hoped?" Alan shrugged helplessly. "It worked out in the end." He pointed out weakly.

Good grief, Harry was a Gryffindor and thought that plan was stupid. Severus looked murderous.

"Are you telling me you thought your eye might be a horcrux and thus you decided to destroy it while it was still in your head?" He growled.

"I was pretty sure that if my eye wasn't the horcrux then I was." Alan hedged. "I'd rather be dead than keep that bastard alive, you know?"

Severus relaxed minutely. “That factor does have merit, but the timing and arrangement of your abysmally foolish actions is inexcusable.” He glanced up and grimaced. “We will finish discussing this later. I think we should probably head in the direction of Hogwarts before we get mobbed.”

Harry glanced around and felt a quick sense of agreement. He doubted many had missed seeing his duel with Voldemort – he remembered there had been an excessive amount of show to the battle, although why there had been was currently escaping him. Suddenly, the crowd surged forward and a middle-aged witch leaned over and hugged him.

Okay, just because she was an inch taller than him didn’t mean he was a stuffed animal to be cuddled!

“Excuse me, ma’am.” Harry offered. “Please, I need to –”

“I’m so thankful, child! Your duelling was brilliant!” She gasped out. “I was so astonished to see you fighting like that!”

“Move aside!” Someone else hollered. Harry rapidly determined this wasn’t going to improve, and struggled out of her grip as someone pulled her back, glancing back and seeing Severus was glaring everyone else away from the incredulous stares Alan was getting. Harry shelved pride and ran over to duck within Severus’ circle of influence.

“Do you think I’d get arrested if I ran out of here as an Animagus?” Harry asked tersely. Alan laughed softly, and then pointed outside the group.

“Want to ride out on a white horse? Well, dun. Suppose Neville doesn’t have everything.”

Harry looked up and waved enthusiastically. Hermione was sitting on the back of Neville’s horse form, scanning the crowd with concern. When Harry waved, she locked on and nudged the horse closer, finally announcing, “Excuse me! Cavalry coming through!”

Surprisingly, it actually worked and people stepped aside, watching her and Neville with interest. Neville trotted straight up to Harry to nuzzle his hair, and Severus whispered. “Kindly don’t change back. We don’t need any more sensation than these two morons.”

Neville tossed his head and stamped lightly, still snuffing at Harry’s hair and tapping his shoulder. Harry laughed.

“Enough, Neville. I’m in one piece. Alan was the moron who almost got himself killed.”

Neville immediately glared. Alan tiredly flipped him off in answer. The crowd on the far side was suddenly split by a group of people and students. The spell damage on their clothes announcing they’d been doing something other than hiding in their homes, so the general populace gave them precedence. In the front was Remus. He beamed as soon as he saw Harry, running over and hugging him fiercely. A mutinous murmur went up around them, but Harry just ignored it, hugging back and glancing up at Remus when he had a little more space.

“That was unexpected. What’s got you so happy?”

“Fenrir is thoroughly dead.” Blaise drawled. “And he,” he popped his thumb at Remus, “quite happily ripped the man to pieces. Almost literally.”

Harry blinked and beamed back at his honorary uncle, hugging him as well. “That’s terrific!”

“That’s lovely,” Blaise interrupted again, unimpeded by Harry throwing a rude gesture his direction, “but is that cracked-skull corpse what I think it is?” His voice trembled slightly.

“If you’re asking if the black mess with his brains blown out is Voldemort, it is.” Alan tossed in. “Although Harry’s going to be stuck with most of the publicity for it considering he threw the bastard into the window after an apparently spectacular duel with all sorts of pretty lights.”

"Why do you sound like you've got a concussion, Alan?" Lucille and Salvador limped up together, both leaning on the other for support. Lucille's voice was tired, but no less sharp than usual.

"Because he had to get rid of the horcrux in his eye." Luna answered lightly. "Otherwise Voldemort couldn't die. So he used the Killing Curse."

Harry quickly revised his opinion of Luna's stance on Alan's actions. She was fucking pissed: she'd just sicced all the Slytherins on him.

"You did WHAT?" Blaise screamed.

Lucille blinked. "Alan ... Go sleep with the Gryffindors. For the next year. We'll just take Harry in your stead, okay?"

Alan groaned. "I don't care where I sleep so long as I get a bed. Neville, please may I catch a ride?"

"How about you ride Blaise ... Er, I'll ride Blaise." Harry added as Blaise just glared at Alan. "And we can put together what happened down here once we can sort the people apart. We're just a bunch of students, we're not needed, right?"

Severus smiled faintly. "No, you're not needed. However, please wait here while I check for anyone who needs immediate medical attention."

Neville suddenly chuffed, and Hermione jumped. "Oh, Daphne! She's with Susan in the ... somewhere. She wasn't sure if she'd get the spell right even after Neville told her."

Severus nodded. "What spell was it?"

"Fifth bleeder curse?" Hermione hedged. Harry concurred, and Severus slipped out. Once he was gone, a man stepped forward and called, "Thank you!"

Harry sighed, and rubbed his face, turning away from the admiring masses. "How many Death Eaters were there?"

"About five outside the Three Broomsticks." Remus answered. "I think three more were by the Shrieking Shack. We passed several near Weasley Wizard Wheezes and Honeydukes, but they were thoroughly subdued. Those around here..." Remus shrugged.

"Dealt with." Tracey cut in. Harry jumped; he hadn't seen her join the group. "Although I think we've got a casualty or two. I'm not sure."

Harry kept his hands on his face. "Is everything as good as it's gonna get?"

"Far as I know." Tracey shrugged.

Harry glanced up. "Did you see Melanie or Nanna? I think they were in Honeydukes."

"We could go check." Remus shrugged.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Through this crowd?"

"They're not that scary, Harry." Remus smiled and pointed out.

"Hah." Harry scoffed. "You're not the one who got randomly hugged."

Blaise scowled. "Just glare at them, Harry. You just defeated their Dark Lord,"

"Alan did that." Harry pointed out.

"Alan put a bullet in his brain." Alan pointed out. "You fought him and threw him into a window. If I hadn't stepped up, you'd have had him down shortly thereafter. I call that a defeat in and of itself."

"Gee, thanks." Harry drawled. "Does this mean Voldemort is the first Dork Lord in History to get defeated three times, twice by the same person?"

"I'd follow that." Salvador cut in. "Once by a baby and twice by two students."

“Poor little man.” Luna murmured.

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As it turned out, Nanna was fine. Melanie was cursed something bad, but Harry knew most of the curses and their counters and quickly got her stable. A few others in Honeydukes needed some attention, which Harry gladly gave, and he pulled Melanie out gently to rejoin the group. Severus had a small group of injured gathering in front of Weasley Wizard Wheezes, and, unfortunately, there were two bodies so far laid out to the side of the smashed door, covered in black cloth. Neville the horse was standing and stamping nearby, clearly irate, but not moving much as Alan was draped across his back, unconscious. Harry moved to Severus and laid Melanie down with the rest of the injured, pointing the others to join the line of those still ambulatory. Severus quickly turned and finished the spells Harry hadn’t known, frowning before sighing.

“She’s going to have to wait out the last, it’ll be about two days. She’ll need to be on bed rest for it; it’s one you had. Lack of proper muscle control.”

Harry nodded, and left her where she was for the moment, moving along and dealing with spells and injuries as he could, leaving the more complicated and obscure to Severus. He got an affirmative grunt for his efforts, and about five minutes later, someone with brilliant red hair joined Harry at his work. Harry thanked them for healing a laceration he’d been glaring at, and then looked up and gulped,

“Mum!”

“Hello Harry.” She grinned. “Weren’t expecting me?”

“Er, no.” Harry stumbled. “It’s just … no one else is here. Of the Order. Well, other than Remus and Severus.”

“There was another large attack in Diagon that didn’t get the memo that Voldemort was killed. The Aurors and a large portion of the Order

are there. I got sent here as soon as Dumbledore got word, but as he'd expected Voldemort in Diagon ...”

“He didn’t expect him to come here, after Alan?” Harry asked, incredulous. His mother quickly pulled his attention back to the man they were helping, who was fortunately unconscious so his healer’s lapse wasn’t noticed, but he insisted on an answer. Lily sighed.

“If he did or not is up to him.”

“You think he did.” Harry asked pointedly, thinking about the spell he was looking at. This was the same as the one on Daphne. “Hermione, come over here?” He called, and then looked at his mother. “Well, mum?”

“Yes, I think he did. And I think he expected and wanted Alan to fight for himself.”

Hermione came over and Harry got the counter out of her, correctly guessing she’d seen it and teasing her about why she’d been right there. Hermione flipped him off and sat down to watch him work. Harry glanced at her, and turned back to his mother.

“Do you think Dumbledore knew about the -the horcrux?” It was old news, so no danger of mentioning it out here, and Hermione wouldn’t say anything anyways. Besides, he wasn’t entirely sure what a horcrux was anyways, other than that it had been keeping Voldemort alive. She’d find an answer if one was to be found soon enough to explain.

“I think he did...” Lily offered quietly. “But I notice Alan is alive. How did everything turn out? I presume you heard about it from Alan?”

“Yeah, just now. Alan shot the Killing Curse into his eye socket to get rid of it.” Harry answered curtly. “Under his own will, too.”

“What?” Lily shouted.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, he survived.” Harry added, as though it explained everything. Lily was glaring. “It appears his eye was the

horcrux, so Alan just has a massive headache now rather than a spiffy magic-imbued eye keeping his arch-nemesis alive.”

Lily rubbed her forehead as Harry finished the counterspell. “It’s times like these I remember Sirius Black and Regulus are related. Both you and Alan are insane.” She sniffed dramatically. “I’m such a failure as mother.”

Harry gave her a worried look and moved on to the next injured.

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Within the hour, the fight in Diagon cleared up and the thestral drawn coaches were moving the Hogsmeade casualties into the castle. The dead were arranged to figure out which was which. Surprisingly, there were few Death Eaters left alive, but the number of civilians still numbered too many, including two teachers and three students aside from several people who had simply been visiting. In total, it was only twelve although three times that many were injured, some severely. He didn’t look at the students or teachers; time enough for that later. Mostly, he was just confirming the deaths of those who’d tortured him.

One face among the Death Eaters made Harry halt, and his eyes burn.

Raina.

He crouched beside her and wondered what had killed her. It didn’t ring as the Killing Curse; she had a bit of a look to her face that wasn’t startled...

“It was me.”

Harry glanced up to see Theodore standing gingerly nearby. He’d had several ribs cracked, and the rest of him bruised; he wasn’t supposed to be up after just having been healed, but apparently he was just as stubborn as Alan.

“She didn’t leave me any choice.” He continued, his voice surprisingly dull.

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why did she want to die?"

"My guess?" Theodore shrugged. "Self-hatred. I probably didn't help. She saw me get out of it and felt weak. Despite me not getting raped or beaten by my family and only having to deceive a delusional father and not two brothers and both parents... Sometimes people are stupid." He nodded back to her. "It wouldn't have hurt. She was happier for it."

"Her father and older brother are dead." Harry offered quietly. "Vadim got himself strung up in Honeydukes by Dillan."

"But not dead?"

"No, just hung from the ceiling in the corner by his ankles." Harry laughed shortly and stood. "Dillan said he didn't want to scar the children."

"How noble." Theodore sneered. He turned a curious look on him. "Now what's this I hear about Alan being stupidly Gryffindor earlier?"

"What, you mean him surviving the Killing Curse from Voldemort?" Harry laughed out. He didn't know where that one had started, but the tale of his and Alan's duels with Voldemort had already started to get exaggerated. "Yes, he did something stupidly Gryffindor. I think Blaise is starting a petition to get him and I transferred at the start of next year since I refuse to give up my Quidditch Captaincy in the middle of the season. Well," Harry grinned, "more of an opinion poll to see if anybody in the dorms mind. They seem to take the permission part of it for granted."

Theodore nodded, and insisted, "What did he do?"

"Hit himself in the eye with the Killing Curse?"

Theodore blinked slowly. "Um ... why?"

Well, that was the first person to not shout. "Because his eye was an accidental horcrux."

Theodore abruptly paled. "Voldemort had a horcrux?" His voice broke on the last word.

"You know what they are?" Harry asked, curious.

"Harry, I had a Death Eater for a father; I didn't want to know but I found out by accident and ... that's fucking scary. No wonder he didn't die."

Harry blinked. "Alan mentioned there had been seven... We got them all destroyed, though, as far as I can tell, since Alan's sure he's dead. I'm gonna have to pin him down about that..."

Theodore took a long, deep breath and then sighed. "Okay, I'd like to sit down now, okay?"

Harry laughed softly and walked over. "Fine, be that way."

"Who all are among the dead Death Eaters you know?" Theodore asked softly.

"Antonin Dolohov; I killed him. Fenrir Greyback; Remus did him in. Three Kozumpliks. Thaddeus Pupp; his mother is in custody. So are Crabbe and Goyle actually. Tried to attack in Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Failed miserably, and since the Death Eaters outside had already killed someone within, the crowd overreacted and they expired."

"They would." Theodore nodded. "I managed to keep them in line after Draco left by putting the fear of Merlin in them, but once out here I'm not surprised they tried to act out. Don't they have Auggie Rookwood in custody?"

"Yeah. At both attacks, there were only twenty actual Death Eaters. They had twenty trolls in Diagon, though, and that raised the chaos level pretty high."

"Makes sense. Doesn't look like they did much here."

“Unlike the average wizard,” Harry started out sarcastically, “We’ve got a bunch of overachievers on our side down here. Put in a Hodges and two Bakers, stir with one American and you get a lot more resistance than expected; the supposed Ace of Voldemort being tied up with the only two upstarts capable of matching him results in a fight that’s a lot less stacked than expected.”

Theodore began to snigger non-stop, and gasped slightly. “Dammit Harry, stop making me laugh!”

“Too easy.”

“If I had any breath,” Theodore snorted and almost managed to calm down, “I’d so hex you.”

“Ah, but then I’d stop supporting you and you’d fall on your newly healed ribs and that wouldn’t feel good at all. Alan assures me of it.”

“Alan’s been through the wringer too many times.” Theodore whined.

“Too true. Now c’mon, the big damn heroes need to ride back up to the castle.”

Harry helped Theodore into the carriage and then turned to help Nanna, Dillan and Tracey in as well. The injured were up at the castle already; those who had stayed to help pick things up were being taken back in order to ensure all the students were safe and nobody had disappeared. Harry, however, didn’t take a carriage and climbed up behind Hermione on Neville- Alan had gone up with the injured. Harry huffed and leaned around her to pat his neck.

“We need to get you a Marauder name so people don’t wonder why I’ve got a horse named Neville.”

Hermione snickered. “But I like riding Neville.”

Neville’s head tossed abruptly, and then ducked down to rub on one of his legs. Harry snorted and started laughing again, pulling Hermione into a hug.

"Hermione, don't say things like that unless you mean the double entendre."

Hermione elbowed him. "I do mean it."

Neville bugled, clearly annoyed. Harry patted his chest.

"Let's head on up already, and then you can join the conversation and get your woman in line."

"I am not a something to be owned!" Hermione growled irritably.

"No, but you are his. It's about the same as he is yours." Harry's tone was maddeningly reasonable. Hermione turned to sit primly ahead of him, working hard on keeping her balance bareback.

"I'm not talking to you anymore."

"Fair enough, but I've currently got the Animagus book." Harry pointed out.

"You still have that?"

"Sure. Dad gave it to us. Neville's practically got it memorized, and I'm done refining my form, so if you're interested ... and Ron, too."

Hermione twitched, and then settled for. "If I could hug you right now, I would. However that's quite inadvisable so you'll just have to wait. Of course I want to use that."

"Good. Talk Neville into teaching you. He understands it better."

"You understand Ron better, though." Hermione pointed out.

"It's not that hard to understand Ron!"

"Easy for you to say. How well do you understand Neville's learning processes?"

Harry blinked. "I just thought it was osmosis?"

Hermione just snickered again.

"Oh, fine. I'll help teach Ron. Geez, you stupid smart people."

Neville purposefully put in large bounce in his step, and Harry just started laughing again.

"You set yourself up for this one, Neville."

He tossed his head, and Hermione giggled. "I think he's going to have a few words for you when we're back at the castle."

"Actually, I think we're close enough to walk the rest of the way. You could change and not get caught, so we'll have a little less sensation. Sound good to you?"

Hermione looked and found nobody behind them, so they slipped off and Neville changed back. Immediately, he swatted Harry upside the head and grabbed Hermione. She wasn't fighting the ensuing kiss at all, and Harry just rolled his eyes, coughed, and strode past. He'd gone a few steps beyond when they both finally caught up, Neville laughing happily. Harry found he didn't mind their closeness so much; they were still vitally important to him, and Neville hadn't been this cheerful in too long...

Merlin, he felt sappy. Did ending a war do this to everyone? It almost didn't feel real.

Returning to the castle jacked the surreality level up about twelve notches. The students were mingling with a bunch of adults, and someone almost immediately recognized them and hollered out, "Harry Potter's here!"

If he could have melted into the floor, he would have. Instantly. Maybe he should have pulled out his invisibility cloak. Either way, it didn't matter now, and he was almost swamped with people coming to try and shake his hand, or hug him. He couldn't even argue injury; Severus had gotten rid of the surprisingly few spells that had stuck on him, and other than a mild ache he was perfectly healed. It left him

bereft of much of anything to use to get the people to leave him alone. Neville and Hermione could only do so much. Finally, Hermione pushed someone aside, and asked after Dumbledore or the other teachers.

They were directed through to the Great Hall, and glanced around fitfully. It was hard to find anything in the crowd of well-wishers and family. Apparently Hogwarts had become a relay point: off to one side, mediwizards were disapparating with family and injured parties, while a number of Aurors and politicians were yelling at each other in the corner. Someone red-haired and looking like a Weasley hurried over and frowned in concern at them.

“Harry!” He called.

Harry took a moment to actually realize who it was. “Percy? Is that you?”

“Yes. The Minister, Scrimgeour, he really wants to talk to you.” Percy sounded pompous as Hell for a moment, and Harry considered how best to tell him to shove it, and then Percy moderated his tone. “Look, Harry, it’s my job. I’ve been an ass, but so has he and I’m tired of it, but I can’t do anything. I’ll go find your parents; just talk to him, alright?”

Harry grimaced, but accepted. It would get the general populace off his back, and he had Neville. He gave his brother a pleading look and got a nod in return before following Percy over to the new Minister, where Harry abruptly realized it was Rufus Scrimgeour, the former Head Auror.

Wow, he’d really been out of it this year. Hadn’t they mentioned that at the party?

Rufus Scrimgeour beamed at him when he found him there, and eagerly shook his hand.

“Harry, it was wonderful to hear you are as dedicated as your father! I’ve heard from several people you were foremost in taking Voldemort on yourself down in Hogsmeade.”

Harry smiled hesitantly at him. He had admired him as a good leader, a good Head Auror. He didn't know what he'd been like as a Minister, and with how often he'd been let down by politicians recently, he wasn't sure what to think, ... "It was something I had to do, sir. There wasn't anyone else who could take him on, not after Alan got injured."

"Most remarkable, that." Scrimgeour noted. "But such discussion could move elsewhere. Would you come with me, to the staff room off the Hall? I'm sure some peace wouldn't come amiss."

It wouldn't hurt at all. "Certainly, sir."

He let Scrimgeour lead the way, and gestured for Neville and Hermione to follow. Both did so without a word; somewhere along the way, Blaise joined them with a curious look. Harry just shrugged at his curiosity, and Blaise trailed after them. When Scrimgeour opened the door and found that Harry's friends had followed, he frowned.

"Your friends, Harry?"

"Yes sir. Is it all right if they come in with me?"

Scrimgeour frowned, but nodded slowly. "I see no problem with it. By all means, join us."

Harry gratefully moved to take the couch near the fireplace. Neville sat on the other end, and Hermione sat on the arm, Neville's arm wound around her waist. Blaise stood behind Harry, leaning on the back of the couch. His presence was surprisingly comforting.

Scrimgeour eyed the arrangement, and spoke quickly to someone outside the door before closing it and standing attentively next to the chair opposite.

"Your father has spoken out avidly about taking on the Death Eaters, and while he was disappointed with my leaving my position as Head Auror, I do believe I have done well as Minister. I was very pleased to have Frank take over my position halfway through the school year," He nodded at Neville, and Harry blinked again, feeling ignorant, "And

he has done a wonderful job. I'm curious, are either you or your friends thinking of becoming Aurors?"

Harry rubbed at his face. "I'm only halfway through sixth year, sir. I'm not really sure where I'm going."

"It would be an honour to have you in the Aurors, Harry." Scrimgeour offered gently. "Defeating Voldemort –"

"I didn't defeat Voldemort." Harry snapped.

"Bullshit." Blaise snapped. "You defeated him before Alan killed him. Get over it."

Scrimgeour's eyebrows arched across his forehead. "I haven't heard a coherent explanation of what happened down in Hogsmeade yet. Would you offer your insight, all of you?"

"I wasn't there." Neville answered. Hermione nodded; Harry considered beating one of them for opting out. Blaise just shrugged when Scrimgeour looked at him, but Harry answered shortly,

"I went down with Ron; it was his birthday. I was heading to the Three Broomsticks when the first Death Eaters apparated in. I knocked those down and heading back through the town; I had friends I needed to look out for, and suspected Voldemort might arrive for Alan. I found Alan in front of Scrivenshafts, duelling Voldemort. He got knocked out; I took over in his stead and duelled Voldemort for several minutes, culminating in throwing him into the window and Alan shooting him in the head." Harry just shrugged. "And then I hung around to help heal a few people, coming up here as one of the last. I was looking for Dumbledore when Percy found me."

"Dumbledore is taking care of a few things in Diagon Alley – it got attacked as well as Hogsmeade, and they are cleaning things up there as well. He should be along in a little while."

A knock came at the door, and someone brought in a tray of sandwiches, juice and water. Neville and Harry's stomach's both growled, and the tray instantly grew emptier as the three boys

liberated a sandwich immediately. Hermione laughed for a little while and finally grabbed one herself, along with a cup. Harry had to admit he was starving, which could both be the fact he was growing again some (he was really hoping that), or the fact he'd just used a lot of energy fighting. Either way, the sandwiches were more than welcome.

Scrimgeour fished for a bit more detail, but all he got were short, concise, and relatively unhelpful answers. Blaise had been down at the Three Broomsticks, fighting with Remus, and Hermione and Neville maintained they'd shown up only at the very end, which was completely true. They weren't alone for much longer, and Dumbledore strode into the room with his usual presence. He smiled at all of them brightly, and addressed the Minister,

"Minister Scrimgeour, I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"It has been no trouble." Scrimgeour answered. "I was just talking with Harry about his part in Voldemort's defeat."

Dumbledore immediately stared at him; Harry felt very self-conscious. It wasn't that important, really! He'd hardly done anything... Well, alright, the duel was pretty hard and he'd been lucky he was so versatile in taking care of himself – and that apparently nobody had gotten hit with his dodges – but still it ... hadn't been so much...

With his self-justification falling apart, Harry just shrugged back and didn't look up. Dumbledore nodded carefully and waved to the door.

"I believe we can discuss the children's part in the fight later; there are several matters to be considered before anything else proceeds, including checking several locations. If you four would leave us..."

Scrimgeour tried to object, but none of them were tarrying with the dismissal, slipping out of the room into the chaos of the Great Hall. Harry wondered if it would have been easier to just stay inside and wait out the interrogation and bribes. Several people looked his way and didn't speak, but just as many were staring and talking with their companions.

Blaise squared his shoulders and offered, “Alan’s down in the Slytherin dorms. I don’t see how any of them can complain about taking you down there.”

“Not in the hospital wing?” Harry asked.

“No, no more room and after Pomfrey decided he wasn’t in any danger and just needed a headache potion and rest, she told Lucille to find him an escort to keep him in bed.” Blaise’s mouth quirked. “I think she sicced Luna on him.”

“Luna’s pissed off at him.” Harry pointed out.

“I’d noticed when she outright told all of us what kind of stupid Gryffindor stunt he’d pulled.” Blaise dryly agreed.

“Hey!” Hermione shot. “That was not representative of most Gryffindors I know!”

“Hermione, the Gryffindors you know are half Slytherin.” Harry pointed out. “Unless you meant Ron...” Harry raised his eyebrows and Hermione frowned, but didn’t argue the point. Ron was the typical Gryffindor – and he would do something like that.

“Well,” Hermione continued, “it wasn’t like Alan had a lot of options. If he’d killed Voldemort and hadn’t gotten rid of the horcrux, it could have caused a lot of problems. From what I understand so far,” She glared at Harry as though he had actually known what they were before Alan started talking deliriously, “he could have been possessed again, and I’m sure you remember how well that went over.”

Harry suppressed a shiver. He never wanted to remember Alan getting possessed again. It had been painful to fight his best friend and know that it wasn’t Alan smiling predatorily at him from behind his eyes. He’d been fighting to kill, and the adrenaline he’d had pounding through his veins had left him no room for fear until he passed out as Luna made an effort to halt the fight. He didn’t even remember what had happened when it worked – he’d been so tired, although he knew

he'd only let go when the fight was definitively over. To have that happen again ... it was easier fighting Voldemort face-to-face.

They'd moved along the far wall and were halfway to the door when two girls – Romilda Vane and a year-mate of hers – shoved into the group and wrapped their arms around his neck.

"I can't believe it, did you really fight Voldemort?" Romilda breathed.

"Did you defeat him like they're saying?" Her friend added.

Harry stumbled over an answer and managed, "Yes, but—" before Romilda kissed him.

Kissed him.

He was going to murder Blaise when he got these two girls off him. The boy broke out laughing as Harry firmly removed Romilda's arms from his shoulders and pushed her a step back. "Romilda, please. I'm glad you're happy, but I am not your boyfriend. Don't kiss me. Please, both of you go find someone else to celebrate with."

Romilda gave him a heartbroken look, but her friend sent a glare at him before dragging her away. Harry turned back to Neville and Blaise and glared.

"Not one word."

Hermione softly pointed out, "I think I saw Susan just near the door. That might be Daphne behind her."

Harry canned all dignity and hollered, "Susan! Daphne! That you?"

Blaise was laughing again, but if Harry was willing to bet, he'd say that if he had two girls hanging off him already, most of the others wouldn't try anything that brazen again. He was willing to put up with the black boy's hilarity if he could just stop that from happening. Fortunately for his luck, the girls were within hearing range, and came over. Daphne was frowning at him and her expression promised

something that couldn't have been particularly nice. Harry cut her off by dropping to one knee.

"Would you two please stay with me to help beat off random well-wishers? I've been kissed and hugged already and it's very annoying. I'll do anything for you if you'll just keep them away, both of you!"

Susan and Daphne looked curiously at each other. Daphne's face curved into a smile and she smiled at Harry. "One moment, please?"

Harry just nodded and watched her draw Susan off and whisper softly into her ear. Susan glanced back a few times and whispered back. Harry wasn't going to worry about it. Whatever they came up with couldn't be worse than a horde of hormonal women he didn't even know and possibly a few emotional men. Blaise and Neville, while well meaning, wouldn't be a real deterrent. Girls, however, would be. Nobody messes with girls holding onto their men, and it wouldn't look odd if they told someone to back off.

"Alright, Harry." Susan said as she came back over and gave him an expectant look. Harry stood and offered her his left arm, and gave Daphne a warm smile as he extended his right hand. Daphne smiled and took it, stepping onto his right side.

"Where are we going, then?" Daphne asked gently.

"To find Alan." Harry answered. "Are you healed, then? I'm sorry I had to leave, but-

"Harry, I know." Daphne cut him off. "I'm fine, Susan managed the counter and Pomfrey gave me a couple potions and told me to take it easy but keep moving." She leaned her head against his and laughed shortly. "I don't mind protecting you from getting ravished by random people."

Harry laughed back and glanced pointedly at Blaise – he couldn't exactly point with a girl on each arm – before sighing and resigning himself to a long trip. Blaise was greatly amused as he led the way down to the dungeons.

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Harry had been correct that Susan and Daphne could deter people from actually hugging him, but it didn't stop them from stepping up to him and thanking him, praising him, and various other speeches and calls. The girls got called names twice, insulted and disparaged, but Neville hexed the perpetrators and Daphne and Susan politely thanked him before indicating Blaise to lead them onwards. The crowds thinned some as they entered the depths of the dungeons, but those they encountered weren't uniformly pleased with them anymore – several people outright glared at him, but none of them spoke up.

Entering the common room was a little harder, but Blaise pulled rank as a prefect and got them in, amidst several grumbles and grousing. Pansy nearly shrieked at them, but immediately turned snide upon seeing Daphne.

"Oh, Daphne." She simpered. "I didn't know you were so poor you needed to suck up to the Potter money, even if it means sharing with a duffer like Susan. You could have at least knocked the other tick off –" She cut off with a scream. Susan calmly pocketed her wand again and shrugged innocently.

"It was getting windy. I shut the window."

Pansy screamed again; small somethings were flying around her head – it looked like the Bat Bogey Hex. Daphne hit her with a silencing charm and sighed. "Susan, make sure it's shut next time. My ears are ringing."

"So sorry." Susan returned delicately.

Neville stifled his laughter against Hermione's shoulder, and Blaise frowned.

"If you're quite done, we should go find Alan before someone else complains."

Harry nodded and nudged his two protectors. "Daphne, Susan, let's go. You can laugh at Pansy's misfortunate later."

It didn't stop them laughing, but they did walk along with him to the door Blaise indicated. He knocked, and then pulled it open, letting Hermione and Neville in first and then waiting as Harry let Daphne and Susan pick their own order going in. Daphne got first, and Harry followed Susan as Blaise brought up the tail end. He immediately slid around the girls to go sit on the empty chair by Alan's bed.

His friend looked groggy, and a bruise was forming around his right eye socket. The scar Harry had never seen before was a crooked white line knotted across the middle of his milky pupil. Still, Alan focused on him readily and smiled as though it didn't bother him. It occurred to Harry that Alan had no clue what his face looked like, although it must be very odd to suddenly have only one eye.

"Hey, I hear you're suddenly famous, Harry." Alan said.

Harry snorted. "I hear you survived Voldemort's Killing Curse, Alan."

Alan flinched as most of the Slytherins renewed their glaring at him.
"Harry, that was low."

"I hate all this stupid attention." Harry shot back.

"You are the most fickle person." Alan sighed. "You hated attention because of your father, and now you hate attention for something you did yourself."

"I never beat him-"

"Then what the Hell do you call throwing him into a shop window?"

Harry flinched in turn and looked aside. Alright, so he was being petty.
"You still killed him."

"Okay." Alan agreed swiftly. Harry didn't trust it and immediately frowned at him. Alan was glaring at him: with his right eye out of whack, it was a particularly unnerving stare. "How much longer would

it have taken you to kill him with him on the ground? If I hadn't shot him, what would you have done next?"

Harry blinked, and made himself admit it, "I'd have cut his head off."

"And how would that not have killed or defeated him?"

Harry sighed and sat back in the chair frowning. "Fine. I admit it. I won the bloody war; I beat the Dark Lord. Happy yet?"

Alan beamed at him. "Quite. How are the rest of you?"

Daphne leaned on the back of the chair and slid her hands down his shirt. Harry jumped, but after glancing up at her, he didn't stop her. Her voice was right in his ear as she answered, "Protecting your ever so famous friend here from getting molested by women twice his age, is all."

Alan raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so only girls in his year are allowed to?"

"Yes." Susan answered as she sat on his lap and slid an arm behind his back. Harry just smiled and let them have their way. After all, they were doing him a huge favour by keeping those girls back, and, well ... He gasped softly and bit his lip and Daphne rolled her fingers around a very sensitive part of his chest and laughed softly at Alan's very amused gaze. Harry put his hand on Susan's back and signed his explicit response to Alan's amusement, ignoring the heat he could feel suffusing his face. Blaise ignored the byplay and turned to Alan,

"You feeling up to going somewhere else? I think Slytherin doesn't like having three Gryffindors and a Hufflepuff in the dorms, so we should find somewhere we can all hang out."

Daphne pouted. "And what if I want somewhere where I can lay Harry down and have my wicked way with him?"

Harry felt foolish he'd thought she'd let his blush go down before embarrassing him again. Luna purred something into Alan's ear and he straightened, sliding his legs off his bed. He was shirtless – Harry really hadn't expected otherwise – but apparently he must have had

some bottoms on to be effectively getting out of bed with all of them there. He smiled at their group.

"I think I know a place where we can have both of that. Go find the rest of the group you want to get together and we can all go find our way up there."

Blaise looked around and shrugged, and Harry didn't have anything to say otherwise. Neville, however, pulled out the map to look over it.

"Ron and Hannah are probably already celebrating by themselves since they're ... yeah, hiding in a broom closet. Fred and George are sitting over Carmine in the hospital wing. I don't want to know where the two Bakers are, Tracey ... hospital wing with Theodore, surprisingly," Harry snorted at that observation, but he wasn't so surprised. Theo had looked like he might want company, any company. "Ginny is ... walking down towards here." Neville glanced up from the map and shrugged at Blaise. "We could pick her up on the way to wherever we're going. Everyone else is busy."

Alan nodded brightly, and shooed them out so he could get into trousers. Once presentable, they did in fact walk into Ginny – who then had to be pried from Blaise's face – and followed Alan all the way to the seventh floor and to a blank wall and a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. Neville immediately frowned at it.

"Er, Alan, we don't need more evidence that you scrambled your brains. We were coming to that conclusion fine on our own."

Alan scowled at him. "Luna found this earlier this year, not me. Now, wait here a moment."

Alan quickly strode up the hall, spun on his heel and strode back, making a face at Blaise as he went. Further back down at a large vase, he stopped, spun again, and came back to their group.

Harry's eyes jumped from Alan to the wall behind him where a door had suddenly materialized. Harry just stared; Neville swore under his breath.

Happily, Luna announced, “Welcome to the Come and Go Room!”

“Or, more normally,” Alan wryly added, “just another room in Hogwarts.”

Luna pouted at him. “We have to call it something.”

“You got that name from the House elves.”

“Fine. Room of Requirement.”

“R.o.R. or not,” Blaise interrupted, “what’s in there?”

Alan turned to face him and then stepped forward, “Whatever you need.” He opened the door with a flourish and waved them inside. Luna happily skipped in first, followed by Susan tugging Harry and Daphne along to follow her. Cautiously, Harry walked inside and just stared.

It was a large, comfortable sitting room, arranged with a large couch, two love seats and an armchair around a blank fireplace. The room was decorated more like Grimmauld Place than anything, dark grey, rich brown, some black and a spattering of green or blue. The metal work was all silver. Daphne and Susan both finally let go of him to look at the paintings and items and squeal with glee as Luna poked and prodded several items into making puffs of smoke and noise. Hermione and Neville were walking to the wall near the door that had bookshelves on it, and Blaise and Ginny came in last, followed by Alan. Immediately, Blaise looked back at his friend and scowled.

“Transporting the couch from the common room here is not appreciated, Alan.”

Luna piped up immediately, “This is actually the first room we opened; the armchair is straight from the library.”

Daphne and Blaise both immediately stared at Alan with arched brows. Alan coloured. “Oh shut up, Luna. That would have been a lot more fun than getting covered in dust looking for a horcrux.”

The word changed the whole feel of the room. Hermione tugged Neville off the bookshelves and stalked up to Alan. “What is a horcrux, Alan? This is the first time I’ve heard of them.”

Alan blinked cautiously, and then swore under his breath. “No, it actually isn’t –”

“Yes, it is!” Hermione and Neville both snapped in turn. Harry let them beard him; they’d both know if they’d heard a word like that before.

“Alright, lemme sit and then we can explain. And a book about them would probably help ...”

The coffee table between the couches immediately was graced with a mouldy, dark-looking book that rattled. Luna skipped over, followed by Daphne and Susan and everyone picked a chair. Harry blushed as he realized the couch was where Susan and Daphne were planning on sitting; Hermione and Neville were already taking over the loveseat to his right, Blaise on the loveseat to the right of Alan’s armchair. Alan, with Luna in his lap, glared at the book for a long moment until Neville coughed lightly. Giving up on the book for the moment, Alan straightened and ran his hand through his hair.

“Alright, you have heard mention of the horcruxes before; just not their names. Regulus’ locket was a horcrux, one of seven. So was the cup Peter bargained. Luna was looking for one here; Dumbledore said he’d taken care of a few others, to a total of six.”

“You said there were seven ...” Blaise pointed out.

“Yes. Seven.” Alan touched his eye. “An accidental seventh was made out of my eye.”

“What is a horcrux?” Neville demanded.

“A piece of one’s soul, broken off when one commits murder.”

Everyone in the room paled to one degree or another. Neville coughed, and finally weakly asked, “Truly? That cannot be right.”

"Well, you have to do rituals and plans and so forth in order to seal it into an object. Otherwise, it's just damage. I don't know much about them myself, I just know what they are and that they exist." Alan's hand hovered back over his eye again; Harry wondered if he knew he'd done that for years when he spoke of Voldemort. "I really didn't care, or want to know anymore." He laughed abruptly. "I just thought they weren't my problem. Ironic, that."

Soft laughter travelled between them before they finally settled into a contemplative silence. After a minute, Hermione had to ask once more, "So your eye was a horcrux? Are you sure it's gone?"

"A killing curse destroys the connection between body and soul. The shock of how abrupt it is kills the body in a way a dementor never would." Alan answered softly, with academic detachment. "Since I still have my soul, and my body didn't stop working, I'd say there was something up with my eye. With his other horcruxes and the mess he'd made of himself, I'd say another horcrux is more than plausible."

Luna was nodding slowly, holding Alan tightly. Harry could only smile for a long moment. He was just happy his friend was alive, but he had to say it. "So, the 'shock' of the horcrux being detached is probably why you've got a great shiner blooming, then?"

Alan blinked and touched his eye. When he flinched, giggles started. When a mirror abruptly appeared on the table, and he glanced into it and swore, Harry couldn't help but all out laugh.

Alan studied the look with an expression of disappointment until he finally sighed and admitted, "Yeah, that's probably why. Luna, why didn't you tell me I had a black eye?"

"Because your eye is actually white with that scar, rather than your normal black. Your other eye is black too."

Alan clearly stopped himself from picking up the mirror again and turned to tickling Luna.

While everyone else was laughing, Harry felt Daphne tug on his arm. He looked, and then followed her finger to a door in the wall that

didn't lead outside. On his other side, Susan also was smiling lightly. With everyone else distracted, Harry hesitantly stood with the girls and followed to the door. Daphne inched it open on a lush bedroom with a larger bed than Harry had certainly ever seen. The girl's smiles were making his belly flutter, but he stepped over the threshold just before he heard Alan shout,

"Good luck!"

His face scarlet, Harry considered running up until the door swung through him to slam shut. Trying the doorknob would've looked cowardly and like he wasn't nearly as interested as he was – and with his luck, it was locked anyways. He was still considering it when Daphne softly called out, "Hey Harry, you did say you'd do anything for our protection, right?"

Harry swallowed and turned around. He gulped.

Susan was about as red as he felt; even Daphne was a little pink in the dim light. While he watched, Daphne unbuttoned her shirt while Susan just pulled hers off. Harry was pretty confident in making a wild guess about what they wanted.

Well. He'd be a cad to refuse, now wouldn't he? War heroes were supposed to expect that kind of thanks ... right?

A/N: Wrapping the stuff up. Explaining a few things not previously explained in this story, and... well, one more chapter to finish it all off.

I should've gotten this up last night, but surely you can forgive me for having gotten lost in doing the revision? Please? I've almost redone second year! Do be excited.

Any of you see one big thing that hasn't been resolved? *winks* Or more...

Fire & Napalm

Chapter Sixty

Alan raised his head slightly and took a minute to figure out how to read the mantle clock upside-down. He concluded it was about seven, which meant it was morning. The last time he'd looked, it'd been nine.

Glancing further around the nicely furnished room, Alan found his clothes on the floor, and, sticking out of one pocket, the polished wand Luna had lent him. Dully, he thought he'd have to find his spare wand now, but something rebelled against the thought. Luna had given it to him, hadn't she? She'd probably do very little with it; she wasn't a particularly strong witch, and that wand... Merlin, Mary, and Mordred, the only other wand that had channelled his power so well had been Harry's, and even that had paled next to this one. Maybe Luna was right, and that was the Elder Wand she'd claimed. If so...

If so, he was reacted exactly as the fairy-tale described. Alan groaned and tried to roll over, but was stopped by Luna's weight across his thighs. He glanced down at her blonde hair tracing across his chest as she slept on despite his waking. He looked further to where her pale skin terminated under the blanket, and sighed deeply.

He didn't need her wand. It was hers. And hadn't he not believed her? He didn't want to be knifed in his sleep over a piece of wood. She could have it back.

The point stuck in his craw, but he stubbornly determined to follow through.

Someone pounded on the door and Alan jumped. Luna stirred against him and glanced blearily at the door.

"Unlock." She murmured. "Let them come in."

Alan didn't have to chance to remind her they were naked. The door just swung open under the pounding, and Blaise stood in the doorway and just stared. Alan glared at him and dared him to comment.

After a moment, Blaise picked up his jaw and offered; “Neville says that he got called on his mirror by his half-panicked mother. They’re wondering where we all are.”

Alan nodded and answered lightly, “I’ll be just out, then.”

Blaise turned, and then stopped. “Alan, why are you nearly falling off the bed?”

Luna didn’t give him a chance to answer. “I like this angle much better, you know? It’s fun to see the blood rush to his head.”

Alan closed his eyes, not wanting to see Blaise’s reaction and said, “Blaise, just shut the damn door.”

He ignored the stifled sound of snickers and glared back at Luna. “Get up, girl. I need to be dressed.”

Luna happily got off and slid to the floor to find her own clothes, which apparently were folded neatly on the chair. Alan had to walk around the whole bed to make sure he had all of his. He figured Luna had come up with some kind of spell to keep everything orderly, but at least he did know how to spell the wrinkles out. Once they were both dressed, Alan leaned down to kiss Luna lightly and then they left the room to face the rest of their friends.

Alan immediately figured that both Blaise and Neville had also had the exact same evening he had. Neville was grinning ear to ear, his arm resting over Hermione’s shoulders as she leaned up against him as though glued to his side. Blaise had a grin much closer to Alan’s; ‘the cat that got the canary’ was the only thing he could think of to describe it. Its match was on Ginny’s face. However,

“Where’s Harry?”

Neville flushed slightly. “I think Daphne and Susan are trying to figure out where their clothes ended up. When I glanced in, Harry’s were right by the door, so ...”

Alan glared at Blaise. "Seems like both of you two decided to see just how explicit the other rooms were."

"Hey," Blaise defended. "Neville woke me up the same way."

"Early riser?" Luna asked absently.

Hermione went scarlet.

Alan stifled a grin. "Apparently."

"In more ways than one." Blaise deadpanned.

Neville, in his normal fashion, just leaned down and kissed Hermione's cheek. Alan suspected it was to hide just how pink his cheeks were. Further teasing was postponed as the last door opened and Harry stepped out, followed by Daphne and Susan, who were still arguing over something. Harry had a wry smile on under pink cheeks, and Daphne and Susan were both sneaking covetous glances at his back. As all eyes landed on them, Harry coughed lightly and offered, "So, I heard we were wanted downstairs?"

Neville gave a long glance at Daphne and Susan before he forewent that comment and answered seriously, "Yes, Lily and James are quite worried and so's your godparents."

"What, nobody missing the Slytherins?" Harry teased.

Blaise and Alan scowled at him, but Neville answered, "Desdemona is here looking for Blaise, yes, so's Susan's aunt. Hermione's parents called Remus – as he's the only one with a phone – to ask him to check on her for them, and Xeno Lovegood has been asking around but doesn't seem particularly concerned yet. Daphne, I'm sure you can guess that your parents wouldn't ask the Potters or Longbottoms, now would they?"

Daphne's smile faded a bit, but she nodded shortly. "I guess that means we're wanted downstairs, then?"

Neville nodded, and Daphne quickly glanced to Susan before pulling Harry into a long and rather drawn-out kiss. Alan resisted the urge to start counting; it wasn't like she could kiss him in public right now.

When Daphne was done, Alan led the way downstairs. His hand hovered over his pocket a moment before he disregarded it. They were expected somewhere; it could wait.

||||

Downstairs, his mother pulled Harry into a hug the moment she saw him. Amelia Bones grabbed her niece in the same moment; not far off, Neville was being cried on by Alice but she was smiling so widely Harry wasn't sure how to take that. For the moment, though, it was all about Lily's tight hug and James' hand on his shoulder.

When he could think again, Alan wasn't far away, talking lightly with Green. If he'd been hugged, it had been short. They looked more like it was an intellectual discussion than anything else. He couldn't find Daphne anywhere nearby, nor could he find Blaise. Molly was sobbing all over Ginny not far in the other direction, and Luna migrated back through the crowd to grab Alan's hand now that she'd spoken with her father. Harry couldn't help but smile, but soon Dumbledore came over with a small smile on his face as he glanced between Harry and Alan both. Harry had a suspicion he knew what he wanted. Alan glanced over and shrugged at Green, who smiled in turn, but Harry left it to Dumbledore to tell his mum and dad that he wanted a private word.

As if he could come up with words to talk his mother into letting him go anytime before he turned seventeen.

"Lily, may I steal your son a moment? There are still a few things I need to know from his experience, and Alan's."

Lily frowned, but, surprisingly, glanced down at Harry with a question in her eyes before she said, "I think that's Harry's choice. You will be coming home tonight, though." That brought her eyes back up to Dumbledore, who only smiled.

"School is indeed cancelled for the next week. You will have your son this evening, if you are willing to come with me, Harry?"

Glancing back over at Alan, Harry shrugged. "If Alan's going, I'll go. After all, we did bring him down together."

Alan grinned back at him and walked over to shove him. "Yeah right, like I had much to do with it."

Harry didn't respond; that one comment had gotten far too much attention from everyone not related to him nearby. Susan eagerly waved to him as he followed Dumbledore, leading to her getting intently questioned by her aunt. Harry turned away before his blush betrayed him.

They were out of the Great Hall and back up several flights before they went behind the gargoyle into Dumbledore's office. He waved them into seats, and smiled at them both.

"I'm sure you're both aware of how badly your fight with Voldemort has gotten distorted in such a short time?" Both boys nodded, Harry suspected Alan was suppressing the desire to snort same as he was. "I have heard everything from a circle of golden fire, to Alan surviving Voldemort's killing curse, to Voldemort exploding. Would you care to make the truth known?"

Alan glanced to Harry before he started to talk. Harry listened just as intently; he didn't know how that fight began either.

"I was in Scrivenshafts when the Death Eater's attacked and immediately went out to fight. I ... don't remember how, but I was knocked down, I think by Luna to avoid a spell. My wand got broken, and she ... lent me hers." Alan frowned and slid his hand over his pocket. Harry frowned in turn. Shouldn't he have returned the wand already? Harry knew he had a second one in his room. Dumbledore, also, was clearly interested in that development, but Alan moved forward, either not noticing or ignoring their reactions. "I then ran out and engaged Voldemort. During that, I told him we'd destroyed his horcruxes and he told me that he'd had seven horcruxes."

Dumbledore didn't stiffen, or otherwise react. Alan was watching him closely enough Harry knew he'd noted the lack of surprise. Alan, however, merely continued.

"I was, naturally, shocked, but as he kept talking, he mentioned it was ironic." Harry caught a short glance his way, "He tried to haul me over to him, and he tried to take out my eye. It wasn't hard to make the connection, so I glanced around, found Harry nearby, and took a stupid chance and used the Killing Curse on my eye." Alan shrugged dryly. "As you can see, it clearly worked and I was apparently right because it didn't kill me, but my eye is now blind."

"And bruised to all Hell." Harry added. Alan only glared back.

Dumbledore smiled slightly and nodded. "I am glad you did not perish, although taking such a risk was not something I had expected of you."

Alan's mouth twisted. "I won't be a tool to keep that bastard alive. So, tell me already. Did you already know that I was possibly a horcrux?"

Dumbledore sat back quietly and looked between them. Harry kept his face cold, and Dumbledore finally rubbed his nose and straightened back up. "I had a guess, Alan, simply an educated guess. I did not expect how matters played out, but I am pleased that they turned out much better than I had hoped."

"Better than you hoped?" Harry repeated.

"Yes." Dumbledore looked down for a moment, and then back to Alan. "I must admit, I had no thoughts on how to remove the horcrux without the host's death."

Alan looked back at him in silence before he whispered, "You expected me to die?"

"I did." Dumbledore admitted. "And I expected Voldemort to be the one to kill you. I had not thought your eye would contain the horcrux independently of your own soul. That he struck so precisely was a stroke of luck, I think."

“Luck.” Alan drawled. He looked over at Harry for a long moment, leading Harry to suppress the need to snicker, and then back to Dumbledore. “I suppose you could say that.”

“Is your eye now fully blind?”

“Yes.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth and then shut it again before turning to Harry. “I believe I should finish what I set out to learn. Harry, may I ask how your duel went?”

Harry shrugged, and shuddered. “I saw Alan turn his wand on himself; I had fought my way to him as soon as I knew the Death Eaters had arrived. We – Daphne, Susan and I – had been right at the Three Broomsticks and Daphne got hit. I gave Susan my mirror to ask Neville for the counter, and sent her inside. I assumed they’d be safe, and I knew I had to get to Alan because I expected Voldemort to be there and if he failed, or needed backup, I was the only other option.”

Dumbledore nodded his agreement, and, upon another accusing stare from Harry, said, “I did anticipate the attack, and made no effort to be in Hogsmeade due to putting Alan and Voldemort together. I did take steps to achieve my ends; there is no point in lying to two keen young Slytherins, now is there?”

Harry didn’t even flinch at the title and smiled lightly. “At least you admit it. I can feel better about that.”

“And Alan did survive, which is a blessing I am utterly grateful for.” Dumbledore added. “I have never been happier to be wrong in my life.”

Harry cracked a smile, and then continued, “When I saw that Alan – wasn’t in a state to keep fighting, I lit into Voldemort, blaming him for Alan turning his wand on himself.”

"Funny, you then turned on me the moment you saw I was awake." Alan grumbled. Harry just grinned.

"And we duelled." Harry shrugged. "I didn't notice much else, although..."

"There were reports of golden fire erupting from your duelling as each spell hit an invisible wall about four metres from you and Voldemort." Dumbledore offered. "That was the most coherent report I had of that."

Harry hedged; he really hadn't been paying attention, and it sounded so melodramatic, but... "I thought I might've seen something like that, but the tall black-robed snake-faced bastard kinda stole my attention."

Dumbledore frowned, and then held his hand forward. "May I see your wand, Harry? I suspect that might have something to do with the effects you witnessed."

Harry blinked and pulled his wand out, glancing down at it only for a moment before handing it over. It looked the same as always to him.

"Holly and phoenix feather." Dumbledore murmured. "Paired against Yew and phoenix feather ... both from the same phoenix." He pulled a wand from within his pocket and then laid them both down on his desk. Fawkes crooned from where he sat in the corner; Harry had gotten so used to the bird he hardly noticed him anymore. As he crooned, however, golden light glinted down both wands, just a shine that Harry blinked at as he stared.

"That's amazing." Alan murmured. "Are you saying because they were brother wands, that's what caused the fire?"

"I believe just that." Dumbledore answered softly. "The most amazing power I have seen, the miracle of two wands, united in origin, tamed from two ends of power, meeting in ultimate battle ... and Harry won." Dumbledore turned to beam at him. Harry felt himself flush again.

"It was..." Harry cut off as Alan frowned at him, and finally, he admitted, "It was exhilarating, fighting like that. To the death, with

someone so powerful. I don't think I used nearly as many of the deadly curses as I thought I would; it was more ... power. Skill. Anything that would break his shields and make him move, and then one got through, hit him dead on, and I threw him over me without even thinking, barely remembering Alan had –had died, as far as I knew then. I was sad, and just about to turn around when Alan shot him."

"And just about to finish him off." Alan added irritably. Harry maturely stuck out his tongue at him.

Dumbledore smiled at them both again, and asked strangely, "Have you two considered the snitch I gave you for your birthday?"

Alan frowned at him. "Not really, why? I think Harry found it again something during Christmas and ran around the house cackling or something. His father got in on it and played as well, but it's not done anything interesting yet and I doubt it ever will. Why, is there some great big secret about it?"

Dumbledore glanced over at Harry; Harry just gave him another raised eyebrow, adding, "I've tried everything."

Dumbledore just shook his head. "If you ever find it, I think you will be less impressed than anyone else might be. But if you don't, I can tell you will enjoy it still."

Harry and Alan exchanged looks and sighed again. Harry thought about standing, and then asked cautiously, "Has it made it up to you from the Slytherins yet...?"

The Headmaster merely chuckled. "About transferring you to Slytherin, and Alan to Gryffindor? Yes, it has. If you are both in agreement, as are your year mates, I don't see any reason why it should not be done. There must always be a first for everything, after all, although this has some precedence. Students who are just ill-suited to their house after a year or so, friends who stubbornly cannot be parted..." His twinkling eyes glanced over both, "Friends swapping houses, however, is a new one. As with all the others, if the houses are in agreement, as are those changing house and the Head of

House, it will be done. I presume you mean to do so for seventh year?"

"Yeah." Harry nodded. "I wanna finish this year as Quidditch Captain. I think I'll appreciate not having any more work next year. The workload is killing me. Let Ron be Captain."

Alan frowned and sighed. "I have no clue what Slytherin is going to do for Quidditch next year... You may be drafted, Harry."

Harry sent a rude gesture at him, and then glanced between his friend and Headmaster. Dumbledore read it correctly, and waved them both out. "Thank you for confiding in me your part in the fight. I congratulate you both on your wonderful work, and believe it might be better for you to talk to your father, James, about what the Minister might do with your actions and awards."

Harry and Alan met each other's eyes and shuddered artfully. "Great. Politics." Alan offered. Harry concurred, and pushed open the door, leading the way down. As he walked, Harry just rubbed his face. Alan asked after several moments,

"What are you going to do with your father finding out about you transferring to Slytherin? Wait until you ask your mother to buy you new robes?"

"Nah." Harry answered absently. "I'll tell him sooner, maybe during dinner or something."

Alan snorted. "Just a short aside about Quidditch, as per usual?"

"That'd work."

Alan went silent for a long moment and then offered, "I want to see it."

Harry stopped and looked up at him. "Maybe I should ask mother to invite all you over for dinner sometime this week while we're free. I can ask in front of my friends, so you and Blaise can stop being pains about it all."

"Blaise would pay good money to see that, I'm sure." Alan grinned. "And Desdemona would love another chance to try and win Sirius' regard."

Harry blinked. Alan walked past him, grinning widely. Harry just shrugged again and kept up. The shock value would wear off, he was sure.

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Alan turned the Elder Wand between his fingers, staring intently down at the wood. He wasn't its master; he knew that. He'd tried to cast another spell with it, and while it was powerful and impressive, it had resisted him. Luna's allowance had worn out, apparently, and if he wanted it for himself...

He was being ridiculous. He had another wand. It ... just wasn't well matched to him. He considered for a moment taking Voldemort's, but he hadn't won that. He'd have to get it out of Harry, and then...

Someone knocked on the dormitory door, and Alan glared up at it, unconsciously moving the wand into his pocket. "Who is it?"

"Severus. Alan, may I come in?"

Alan hesitated, but answered, "Yeah."

Severus stepped in with a frown on his face, and slowly slid the door closed. "How ... is everything going?"

"It's only been three days." Alan answered softly. "We're eating at Grimmauld tomorrow evening."

"That is not what I meant, Alan." Severus snapped. He visibly tempered his reaction and answered, "I'm wondering how you're feeling about ... everything else. The Dark Lord's death, your friends..."

Alan pulled the wand out again and cautiously turned it over. Luna had been watching him, waiting ... waiting for him to return it, he

knew. He wondered if she was testing him... "It's been pretty good. It's a relief, having Voldemort gone, but ... you know, I've adapted fast. I'm just happy he's gone, and not sparing it any more worry." Alan's mouth twisted, "Well, except for worrying about the media coverage that's going to converge upon Harry and I getting our 'awards for outstanding courage'."

Severus nodded seriously to the statement, and smiled wryly, "While I would have admittedly enjoyed being recognized like that, I suppose you have more of your mother in you." Severus snorted. "Although that has been abundantly clear your entire life."

Alan hesitated; his hands stopping the motion of the wand and cautiously, Alan asked a question he hadn't been able to ask for years. "What was my – Amber like?"

Severus froze. "Has your aunt not mentioned her?"

"They weren't on good terms for about a decade before she died." Alan softly admitted. "Ginger always stiffened up and said they hadn't been close, so I just stopped asking. Regulus hadn't known her that long, although he could tell me she always got her way, but other than that..."

Severus steepled his fingers and sat beside Alan on his bed, thinking. Finally, he answered, "Amber was a lot like you. While you are my son to look at, anyone who met Amber ... and then met you, would clearly see her in everything you do and say. Amber would have been an instant Slytherin. She knew how to make everyone do what she wanted, but she wasn't malicious. Just ... firm. I saw it the moment I saw Blaise go from hating you to following you everywhere in your first week. That was just something your mother would have done."

Alan snorted. "What, tell the truth and then have someone follow her because of it?"

"Precisely." Severus nodded slowly. "She was ... an honest and valuable woman."

"Did you love her?"

Severus looked away.

Alan scowled at him and put his hand on his shoulder. “Why did you have me if you didn’t love her?”

Severus took a deep breath and stood. Alan snarled,

“Great, just leave then. Don’t answer; it’s not like I care.” Alan turned scarlet as his voice broke. He was sixteen years old; he didn’t start crying just because his father couldn’t … care about a woman dead fifteen years. He wasn’t even upset about it, just…!

“I may not have loved her, but she helped me understand whom I did love.” Severus admitted softly. “And she helped me learn how to live with that love, knowing it would never go anywhere. I was distraught, yet grateful, and Amber comforted me the only way she knew how, and I suspect something was … forgotten in the moment.”

Alan didn’t turn to look at him, wiping his face carefully, and glaring down at the Elder Wand as though it was at fault.

“I do not regret it, Alan.” Severus’s voice was closer behind him, and hesitantly Alan felt his hand touch his shoulder. It slid over, and then cautiously tightened, squeezing his shoulder cautiously. “I never regretted it before I met you, and … you are an admirable son. I couldn’t have asked for a better child with more commendable attributes.”

Alan smiled weakly and hesitantly touched his father’s hand that was on his shoulder. Softly, he joked, “You only love me for my Potions skills.”

The hand tightened again, and Alan nearly jumped as Severus sat beside him on the bed and pulled him into a hug – cautiously, and so carefully if Alan had so much as twitched wrong it would have fled. He didn’t move for fear of losing it.

Alan just sat and enjoyed the moment for what it was.

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Severus' moment of tenderness didn't last particularly long, but Alan was smiling still twenty minutes later when someone else knocked on the door. Luna walked in without waiting for him to acknowledge her. Alan fought the desire to tuck the Elder Wand away and finally stood up and walked back over to her, the wand loosely held in his left hand.

Luna looked him over and brushed her hand over his cheek. Alan caught it in his hand and kissed her lightly. When he pulled back, he pulled her hand forward and pressed his left hand against hers.

"Thank you very much for letting me use your wand, Luna." He whispered.

It was a struggle to let go, but when Luna smiled at him, his fingers slipped off the wood with ease. Luna leaned forward to kiss him again. When she pulled back, her only words were,

"Thank you."

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Harry was surprised Sirius had agreed, but the get-together five days after Ron's birthday – and Voldemort's defeat – had more Slytherins than Harry really knew what to do with, and surprises for a few parents. Molly's reaction was so far the funniest. Ginny was wearing robes Harry suspected had been bought brand new for this occasion of high company, and as soon as Blaise arrived she sauntered straight up to him. Molly froze in horror as Ginny dropped an ice cube down his back; Desdemona Zabini was similarly furious, but Blaise just laughed it off and pulled Ginny into his arms to kiss her.

Harry wasn't sure she'd managed to get her jaw off the floor yet, and it'd been nearly a half hour. Then again, Victoria had also given everyone something to look at as she waited eagerly for Morgen's arrival and had gained liplock with her girlfriend after giving a full dissertation of what Harry suspected was the entire guest list to reassure her that it was okay. Morgen still may not have been brave

enough to follow through save for Theodore rolling his eyes and pushing her into her girlfriend's arms.

Following this, the Hodges arrived. As Harry and all his friends had expected, Nanna had yelped in happiness, jumped over their father's lap, and ran straight into Dillan's arms.

The rest of the Order was a tad surprised. James' sour expression at the inclusion of the Hodges had abruptly turned to stunned disbelief, matched only by Daphne finally getting up her courage to saunter over and sit herself on Harry's lap where he was sitting next to Alan, across from his parents. He supposed that knowing Harry was friends with Slytherins was a bit different from seeing all the Slytherins he was friends with – and how close some of those 'friends' were. Sirius had handled it a bit better, well enough he asked the worst question Harry could imagine at the worst time.

"So, Harry." Sirius coughed lightly. "Is this your ... girlfriend?"

Harry could only blush, stammer – and choke as Susan walked into the room. Daphne ... well, he wasn't sure if he could call it 'saving' or not...

"He's still auditioning me." She chirped. "Susan, come introduce the competition, would you?"

Harry wished the sofa would just swallow him whole. Susan strode over and glanced between Harry's red face and his very curious parents before she sat on the arm of the sofa next to him and leaned down to kiss his cheek.

He was so going to kill Alan. Blaise made it back into his good books by sending his mother over to talk to Sirius again. Most of the attention turned to Sirius' blustering and indecision – Desdemona had found a target for her next husband apparently – but James had not been distracted. Harry decided now would be a good time to migrate to the food table and await the perfect moment to drop his bombshell on his father. Maybe he'd forget the girlfriend issue, then...

It didn't come too quickly. Neville had a spit-take before James did. Jonas sauntered over and bowed to Melanie, presenting the grounded girl with a small package. Her curse was set to wear off tomorrow, and she curiously accepted it and smiled before she waved Harry and Neville over. Obediently, without waiting to be asked, Neville scanned the package for curses and smiled tightly at Jonas.

"Clean. Who's it from?"

"Her penpal." Jonas answered cheekily. He strode back to the twins without further ado, and Neville swallowed before he glanced down – and had to swallow again. Melanie was lifting a beautifully wrought gold necklace from the box, followed by a matching bracelet and earrings, each set with a dark red stone. Neville took another deep breath and smiled down at her like his teeth hurt. Clearly, he was repressing the desire Harry knew quite well from when Nanna had been chasing flying strawberries with Dillan – over-protective brother instincts.

Neither of their sisters would appreciate it. Melanie looked up at him and blushed lightly.

"What do you think?"

"Very pretty." Neville offered. "The stones are garnets, I think, aren't they?"

Melanie looked confused and fumbled with the box. It fell off her lap and she swore, but Neville deftly picked it up and returned it to her lap, slipping his hand in and pulling out the letter, handing it over quickly. Melanie scanned it, blushed, and answered in a high voice, "Yeah, they're garnets. You know that really well."

"Melanie, you know I read too much. I'll leave you to your letter."

Melanie just nodded, already deep into reading it fully. Neville turned aside and muttered just for Harry's ears. "At least they were just garnets."

Harry stifled a snicker. Back at the buffet, James and Sirius were standing across from each other, deep in conversation with Severus, Green, Lily and Jonas. Harry noted Blaise, Theodore, Alan and Daphne all within hearing range and quickly met Alan's eyes and smiled. Alan blinked in return, and raised his hand in a seemingly casual manner. Victoria drew Morgen over; curiously brought Frank, Alice, and Remus behind them. Harry stepped up and eyed Ron before he shot,

"Ron, would you want to be Quidditch captain next year?"

Ron stared at him, startled, and James choked.

"Harry, are you giving it up?"

"Why?" Sirius demanded.

Harry just shrugged casually. "I have too much of a workload to keep up with it; I almost can't even play, although I don't have to do too much practice with how natural it is." Harry glanced at them both as though it was obvious. He waited until they moved to drink to settle their nerves before quickly adding, "But aside from that, I don't think Slytherin would appreciate me just assuming the role upon transferring in next year."

It worked perfectly. James and Sirius spat immediately, dousing each other as Severus moved out of the way and Jonas jumped. Harry could only laugh, and shoot an amused look at his mother.

"Mum, did you set them up like that on purpose?"

Lily sent a loving smile at her now-irate husband and admitted, "Yes. Severus told me you and Alan were going to trade and that he suspected you would be shocking him with the news. Really, James, surely you've learned that your son can be just as evil as you are when he tries."

James coughed and wiped his face down, sending Harry a wry smile. "I suppose I should know by now, shouldn't I?" He sighed hard, and then smiled warmly again. "I hope ... you like the dungeons then?"

"Alan tells me it gets pretty cold." Harry nodded. "But really, he needs to move up there. I think the damp seeped into his head, after he pulled such a classic Gryffindor stunt this week, hm?"

That still got a reaction from the Slytherins – and not a particularly friendly one, even if they could tolerate it from a friend. Alan, however, brushed it off and grinned at Harry. Harry only grinned back.

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The evening wound down happily, for most at least. Sirius looked rather thoughtful as Blaise and Desdemona finally said goodbye, and Nanna waved Dillan off with a sad smile. Victoria and Morgen had spent most of the evening deep in conversation, and Morgen was still thinking as she flooded out ahead of Theodore and Daphne. Daphne had already gotten her kiss goodnight; neither Susan nor she had wanted to leave first, but when Amelia called and demanded Susan be sent home, and Theodore also had to leave, as he was Daphne, Morgen, and Tracey's lead home so as not to be flooding in from an 'unacceptable' fireplace, Susan and Daphne had traded off their pleasant goodbyes, and had left. Both were gone; Theodore was going through last and paused before going out.

"Harry, you're really going to become Slytherin for a year?"

"Of course." Harry offered, startled he'd asked.

Theodore bit his lip for a moment, and then offered him his hand. "I'd like to really get to know you."

Harry frowned. Theodore had never indicated he really wanted to be friends with anyone; the way he lived, he would never have any real friends, or at the most very few. Mostly, friends were show to him. He'd taken his title, in a way, when he'd killed his father, which made him suspect to the other purebloods for that alone. While it wasn't unheard of, current politics and Scrimgeour in particular weren't very tolerant of such things. James had mentioned that he hadn't liked the older Nott's death, and while he'd been a Death Eater, that his son had likely killed him didn't endear him to the young Lord.

Harry was the son of a very well liked, high-ranking Light auror. The current Head Auror was his adopted uncle, and the Minister was very good friends of both men. Indeed, Harry was set to receive an award from the Minister himself for his part in defeating a Dark Lord. Having Harry's friendship would go a long way to freeing Theodore from suspicion. It would be very useful to him.

Harry smiled and accepted his hand. "Sure, sounds like fun."

Theodore grinned widely in return.

~FIN~

A/N: And that is all, for this draft. *grins*

Yes, this is being rewritten. Any thoughts you wish to mention will go into consideration for the rewrite and a possible seventh year fic as well.

Please Read & Review - you know those are author's bread and butter. They will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you all for reading. Catch you later!

Fire & Napalm